

JANUARY 2018

The
National

Culinary Review®

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN CULINARY FEDERATION

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DINING DESTINATION fun and games

FUN AND GAMES

TAKE HOSPITALITY TO ANOTHER
LEVEL WITH A WELL-EXECUTED
GAME ENVIRONMENT.

BY JODY SHEE

The 11 Punch Bowl Social restaurants feature such games as shuffleboard, ping-pong, bowling, pinball and Skee-Ball.



When Branch Line opened two years ago, it seemed to the owners that the long, narrow space between the perennial garden and the outside wall near the patio seating area was the perfect spot for a regulation-size bocce court. With about 3,000 business employees working around the Watertown, Massachusetts, restaurant, perhaps some would appreciate a stress-relieving place to hang out outside while waiting for a table or if the bar was full, says general manager Deena Marlette.

What the owners never imagined was that the bocce court would morph into a bookable event space. Now there is a “room fee” for exclusive court rentals based on time of day and day of the week, up to \$200. It provides extra income in a space where tables and chairs weren’t as operationally feasible.

PURPOSE-DRIVEN

Games obviously offer a fun environment, but they also foster longer linger times, and that’s the goal at the 11 units of Denver-based Punch Bowl Social, says founder/CEO Robert Thompson. Because the chain opened in 2012 with a plan to offer such games as shuffleboard, ping-pong, bowling, pinball and Skee-Ball, the massive (more than 20,000 square feet) restaurants have separate sit-down dining and game areas.

The games are not free; they contribute 11% to the bottom line. But that income is not the focus. In his operational mindset, Thompson says, “The games are priced to maximize linger time and food and beverage consumption. Everything we do is to drive incremental food and beverage sales.”

Of course, in a mingling entertainment environment, the menu must feature fun, millennial-appealing, sharable finger foods, as does Punch Bowl Social’s menu. The Plates for Sharing section includes black-eyed pea hummus, Sriracha/peanut fries and lobster/bacon fries. The It’s Nacho Mama’s menu option features corn tortilla chips topped with queso fundido, roasted cauliflower, jalapeño, pickled red onion, jalapeño crema and cilantro.

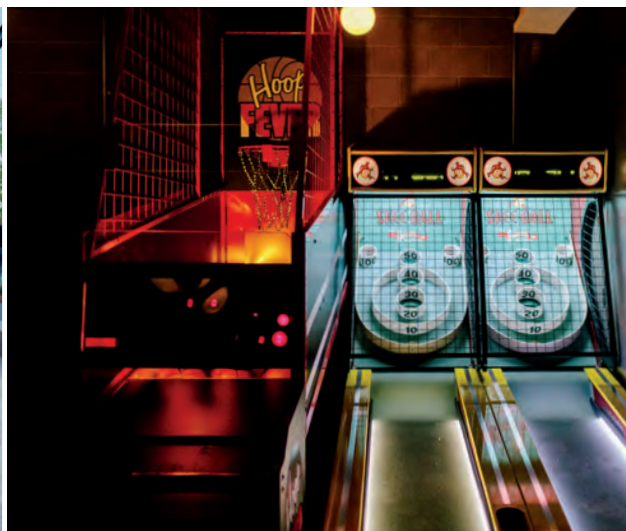
The growing operation, which is looking to expand into a hotel format in its next iteration, also offers Big Baller Platters. The Dawgy Style includes four Snake River Farms Kobe beef franks, four Li’l Street Tacos, crudité and house-cut fries. The Maine Squeeze platter features four lobster rolls, kettle chips, charred onion creme fraiche and bread ‘n’ butter pickles.

GAME SPACE

Repurposing already-available space may be all it takes for others who might want to delve into offering games and entertainment. Chicago’s Old Town Pour House opened in 2012 with a basement where the bathrooms were located along with a wide-open space that was occasionally rented out for events. The restaurant became more intentional with the space when it converted and branded the basement as The Game Room in September 2017 to coax private-event rental, says Angela Zoiss, vice president of marketing. The speakeasy-themed room has a small bar in the corner with eight beers on draft, wine and a special cocktail menu not available in the main restaurant.

The room is outfitted with two large-screen TVs, leather couches, regular and cocktail tables, a 12-foot shuffleboard table and a wide variety of table games. The minimum food-and-beverage spend that is applied toward a two-hour minimum room rental is \$500. Private-event inquiries have increased 8% per month, Zoiss says.

To make the operation run smoothly, a team handles event details, taking menu orders before the event so that kitchen staff is prepared. The menu includes platters of finger food appropriate for the space, which can host up to 50 people.



BOCCE THINK-THROUGH

Along with the rest of the restaurant team, Deena Marlette, general manager of Branch Line, Watertown, Massachusetts, thought through the details of operating a rentable bocce court outside the restaurant. She passes along learnings and best practices:

- Include a bocce court only as a space solution for an area that couldn't best be used for extra tables. "You want extra people sitting, eating and creating income. It has to benefit the restaurant," Marlette says.
- Don't close the outside space for the winter. There are still occasional days warm enough for guests to go out there with coffee or cocoa to play. Keep the court in good condition.
- Bocce isn't merely a millennial-appealing game. Sometimes grandfathers enjoy showing their grandchildren how to play.
- Allow those renting the space for corporate or other events to bring their own games, such as cornhole, to supplement bocce.
- Implement wait-list rules. For example, if a group plays bocce while waiting to be seated, hasn't rented the space, and another group wants to play, have them sign a wait sheet at the hostess stand and inform the current players someone is waiting and they have 20 minutes left to play.
- Assign at least one server to take orders at the court.

pay for the games, electronic machine upkeep and which games are customer-appealing at the moment.

Roxy's Central/A4cade is a Cambridge, Massachusetts, restaurant, bar and arcade collaboration of two restaurant groups, Roxy's, featuring grilled cheese and burgers, and Area Four, a wood-fired pizza arcade restaurant. When you walk through the door, it looks like a grilled cheese shop—a little counter-service fast-casual. But walk through a set of swinging kitchen doors and what looks like a giant walk-in refrigerator door and you enter a happening arcade bar that takes up 85% of the property, says director of operations Joe Barone.

The goal is not to make money from the arcade games. In fact, Roxy's Central/A4cade leases the ever-changing pinball machines and arcade games. Foosball is already out in favor of Mario Kart driving games. Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat are also working well in the space right now. "The vendors keep much more of the profit than we do," Barone says. "We sort of break even, and make money on drinks and food." It's best that way, because the machine vendor is there nearly every day servicing the machines. "I don't want to be in the pinball machine service business."

Because the arcade serves alcohol, the team decided to make it an age 21-plus space with two security guards to keep a safe and pleasant environment. The method of paying for the games is strategic. Rather than offer coin-operated machines, guests must buy tokens at the bar or from a server. "It leads to more interaction. When they look for a server for tokens, they may decide to order fries or a drink," Barone says. There are plenty of places for guests to set their drinks or food down, and the servers continuously clear away empty plates and glasses.

For others who would build a similar space, he cautions them to consider unforeseen costs. Wrist bands indicating the guest has been ID'd is one. Plus, the custom tokens tend to disappear and must be replaced regularly, and token cups add to the cost.

VIRTUAL REALITY

The restaurant game experience of the future may well center on virtual reality as VR technology continues to improve. That's what Philadelphia-based Mad Rex is counting on. The post-apocalypse-themed restaurant and virtual-reality lounge opened in early October 2017. The 8,500 square-foot, 225-seat operation features a dining room, virtual-reality chamber, bar, stage, lounge, outdoor patio and private-event space.

Like other game locales, Old Town Pour House's Game Room has at least one bartender assigned to the events and servers walking around taking orders to maximize spending, Zoiss says. For others who would outfit a game room, she suggests thinking through the furniture. Round high-top cocktail tables do not lend themselves to table games.

GAME EXPERIENCES

Those who work hard at building games into their restaurant brand identity have their own set of issues to work through, such as how guests



Though the dark wood and stone décor with a suspended “crashed” plane and masked body heads and vested torsos is somewhat medieval, the museum-like balance comes in the equally manifest “survivor” theme. Guests pay \$1 per minute to look through virtual reality goggles in the lounge or \$2 per minute in the more private and elaborately appointed nine-seat VR chamber. There, cocktails are served in IV drip bags with straws, and patrons have lockers for personal items.

Why do it? “When you look around a restaurant today, what percentage are on their phones?” asks partner/co-creator Michael Johnnigan. “They need stimulation. It’s the way America is today. We wanted to create a restaurant experience that when you come in, you’re in awe. Your brain is stimulated.”

The VR technology is expensive, but also durable, he says, meaning maintenance expense is not an issue. Each guest gets VR goggles into which a special cell phone fits. The average time spent with the VR goggles is 15 minutes. Guests purchase ahead for a specific time, after which a timer goes off.

A VR manager oversees the restaurant’s entertainment element, which includes hiring a DJ to spin records. The food is also an experience, as the restaurant offers black rocks heated to 550°F and brought to the table with sauces, spices and rare meats the guests can cut and place on the rock to finish cooking, seasoning to taste. “They can squeeze lemon and butter on the rock, put the steak on top, and that really brings the flavor out. Every bite is hot, fresh and delicious,” Johnnigan says.

Punch Bowl Social recently added a VR parlor called the VR Bazaar to its Austin, Texas, location, with others to roll out soon. “The technology has finally caught up with the opportunity,” says Thompson, who insisted that the parlor be open to the rest of the space so people could look in and out. Groups of about six rent the parlor for an hour at a time for \$45, and share a VR headset from which they can play any of more than a dozen games of various skill levels. The restaurant dedicates a tech support person and a food and beverage server to the VR Bazaar.

“Anytime you can add an experience for guests, you are talking the language of the millennial demographic,” Thompson says. “But they only frequent places with a great deal of authenticity. Be cautious of how you integrate entertainment. Don’t come across as inauthentic. Don’t make games an afterthought.” ■



OPPOSITE, LEFT: Branch Line in Watertown, Massachusetts, maintains its outdoor bocce court year-round.

OPPOSITE, RIGHT: Roxy’s Central/A4cade is a Cambridge, Massachusetts, restaurant, bar and arcade collaboration of two restaurant groups, Roxy’s and Area Four, with arcade games.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1) The Game Room at Chicago’s Old Town Pour House launched in September 2017 to encourage private-event rental. 2) The nine-seat VR chamber at Philadelphia’s Mad Rex restaurant and virtual reality lounge serves cocktails in IV drip bags with a straw. 3) When guests at Roxy’s Central/A4cade buy game tokens from a server, they are more likely to order food and drinks.

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