

# UPPING THE BAR

Concessionaires Are Wowing  
Travelers With Their Unique  
Bar Concepts

BY SALLY KRAL



Every airport is different and every airport's food and beverage offerings are similarly distinct. But what makes one airport bar stand out from others? What makes an exceptional offering?

"First, you have to catch a traveler's attention with an attractive design and approachable space - the best airport bars convey a fun and engaging vibe," notes Tyler Pitman, vice president of portfolio development, brand partnerships and adult beverage for HMSHost.

Michael Levine, executive chairman and co-founder of **Tastes on the Fly**, similarly notes that atmosphere is important. "The vibe should be upbeat, and traveling guests should be treated like regulars," he says.

Pitman adds that offering plenty of options so that everyone can find something to enjoy is also key, and this includes both menu items and seating options.

Ultimately though, the best airport bar is one that just happens to be in an airport, notes Rick Blatstein, founder and CEO of OTG. "It delivers the same quality of experience that travelers can expect of top bars in major cities and destinations across the globe," he says. "A destination unto itself, this bar concept will seamlessly blend elements to tell a consistent story,

from an extensive selection of both classic and inventive drinks that champion local products, to an immersive atmosphere with custom design details, curated music, and warm and welcoming staff. Rather than simply offer a place to kill time before a flight, an exceptional airport bar transports guests away from the stress, chaos or unspectacular nature of its surrounding environment."

Luckily for travelers today, the industry's top concessionaires offer a plethora of enticing and imaginative bar concepts at airports all around the country, from unique proprietary offerings to locally celebrated brands.

## Finding A Niche

Earlier this year, **SSP America** opened a new concept at **Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (SEA)** called **Bad Egg Breakfast Bar**, a proprietary brand conceived for a 3,440-square-foot corner space within the airport's Concourse N. The concept has proven to be a hit: It serves 5,000 customers monthly, with predicted 2023 sales approaching the \$6 million mark, according to Sebastiaan Rotteveel, vice president of marketing, innovation and concept development for SSP America.

**Above:** SSP America's new proprietary concept at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport's Concourse N called **Bad Egg Breakfast Bar**, caters mostly to a younger "foodie" clientele with its funky décor and unique takes on classic breakfast fare plus an extensive Bloody Mary menu.





**Left, below:** Paradies Lagardère's Beercode Kitchen & Bar concept was inspired by its *Vino Volo* brand, but with an emphasis on craft beer rather than wine. The concept was introduced in Italy and Germany first, entering the U.S. late last year with openings in San Antonio International Airport (pictured) and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.



In addition to creative takes on breakfast menu classics, which make up 64 percent of total sales, this all-day breakfast bar includes a full Bloody Mary menu and other breakfast-oriented cocktails, plus a variety of local draft and bottled beers as well as Washington State wines.

"The hip spot's energy during Sea-Tac's early morning breakfast rush is like none other - local, rebellious and downright cool," Rotteveel says. "Vintage elements complement the breakfast bar's warm and modern ambiance, giving passengers the feel of a new-school urban diner. Bad Egg's space is centered with an engaging wrap-around bar, an open bar back overlooking the terminal and a welcome mat that says, 'be eggstra today.'"

Rotteveel adds that the concept extrapolates on the 24-hour breakfast trend, catering mostly to a younger "foodie" clientele who want interesting experiences and favor independent brands as opposed to national ones, while also meeting the needs of casual diners seeking familiar breakfast options.



**Paradies Lagardère** is also making inroads with exciting proprietary concepts, opening Beercode Kitchen & Bar in **San Antonio International Airport (SAT)** and **Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL)** late last year. The brand first launched in Italy at **Bologna Guglielmo Marconi Airport (BLQ)** in 2016 and quickly expanded to five additional airports across Italy and Germany, with the SAT and ATL openings marking the concept's U.S. debut.

"Both U.S. locations have been thriving in their respective environments and we're excited to grow this brand quickly," says Claude Guillaume, Paradies Lagardère's

senior vice president of dining operations. "After Beercode San Antonio opened in the fall of 2022, it generated \$680,000 in its first 11 weeks. The restaurant is on pace to approach \$3 million in 2023 in a very competitive environment." Across venues, Beercode sales average about 55 percent beverages and 45 percent food.

Guillaume adds that the inspiration behind Beercode came from the concessionaire's *Vino Volo* brand. "Just as *Vino Volo* has established itself as the top concept specializing in wine - yet now has expanded cocktail, craft beer and menu options - we sought to create a concept





**Above, Left:** HMSHost created the proprietary concept Book & Bourbon Southern Kitchen specifically for Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport. The concept was inducted into Louisville's Urban Bourbon Trail in 2018.



that would do the same in the craft beer market,” he explains. “As our *Vino Volo* wine associates perfect the pairing of the right wine with the right entrée or appetizer, we felt strongly that craft beer should be treated in the same manner. Therefore, we developed our menu with a collection of options that complement each other quite well. To achieve that goal, each Beercode has on its staff a certified cicerone, which is equivalent to a sommelier in the wine world. With a focus on beer styles, evaluations, brewing processes, ingredients and food pairings, our cicerones help deliver an elevated experience for our guests.”

Aiming to create a concept that speaks to the specific region it's in, OTG opened Q in Terminal E at Houston's **George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH)** in 2017. The proprietary brand celebrates the spirit of classic Texas BBQ, with the beverage menu reflecting this with a heavy emphasis

on brown spirits, plus a private label wine program, with premium varietals bottled exclusively for OTG, and a curated selection of Houston craft beers on draft.

Q's architectural design is reflective of the forms and materials found in distilleries, with the massive back bar taking on the shape of copper column stills. There's also a glass-enclosed smoke room and an on-site pitmaster carving the barbecue fare.

“Q delivers one of OTG's most robust bar programs—everything is bigger in Texas, and Q is a true reflection of that ethos,” Blatstein says. “From its towering footprint to its striking, eye-catching architecture, Q attracts a massive amount of guest traffic from its highly central location within the international concourse, making the concept a known destination or necessary pit stop for many who travel through IAH.”

Similarly reflective of its local community, HMSHost's Book &

Bourbon Southern Kitchen was created specifically for **Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport (SDF)** and is meant to feel like a natural extension of Kentucky's many bourbon trails. In fact, the concept was inducted into Louisville's Urban Bourbon Trail in 2018, just a year after debuting in the airport's pre-security area. Book & Bourbon also earned the Airport Restaurant Bar of the Year award from *Airport Experience News* in 2018.

“Book & Bourbon is a destination bar that offers a world-class bourbon tasting experience in an airport, where guests can peruse an impressive list of dozens of world-class, homegrown bourbons, including several rare and allocated bottles,” Pitman says. “The setting is also designed to embrace guests and take them far away from the chaotic airport atmosphere. With the vibe of a private library estate, Book & Bourbon can be a sanctuary for guests to savor their beverage while relaxing on large leather sofas and thumbing through books about bourbon and Kentucky history.”

While Book & Bourbon caters to bourbon aficionados, there's also other spirits, wine and local Kentucky beer for non-bourbon drinkers, with beverages accounting for more than 40 percent of sales, complementing a food menu of upscale comfort dishes based on regional influences.



## Local Love

Carla Wytmar, executive vice president of development for **High Flying Foods**, feels that the best airport bars are those that are extensions of brands found on the street. “You won’t find any national fast food chain restaurants in our portfolio; instead, we choose to partner with local, celebrated brands, iconic chefs and restaurateurs—and New Belgium Brewing tops that list in Colorado,” she says.

High Flying Foods debuted New Belgium Brewing in Concourse B at **Denver**

**International Airport (DEN)** in spring 2019 and *Airport Experience News* named the concept Bar of the Year in 2020. In 2023, the bar will annualize just over \$12 million, according to Wytmar.

“New Belgium is a truly visionary brand, from inventive brews to the fun-loving, collaborative company culture that even its consumers are envious of,” Wytmar says. “New Belgium Brewing at DEN features a full array of the brewery’s beer, which allows travelers to sample Colorado’s favorite craft beer even if they didn’t have

time to go to the brewery during their visit to the state.”

In addition to eight New Belgium Brewing beers on tap, the bar offers a variety of rotating guest beers, traditional and specialty cocktails, as well as unique New Belgium brew-infused creations, plus a menu of hearty breakfasts, Colorado-inspired salads, sandwiches, burgers, and tacos, all made with ingredients sourced from local purveyors when possible, including Huckleberry Roasters coffee, Tender Belly meats, Boulder Valley premium meats and Raquelitas Tortillas, among others, with food accounting for roughly 60 percent of total sales.

Also in DEN is Mercantile Dining & Provisions, a local brand that **Tastes on the Fly** opened in the airport last August.

“Mercantile Dining & Provision in Concourse A includes a bar, New American restaurant and artisanal market modeled after the original Mercantile restaurant at Denver’s Union Station,” says Edie Ames, CEO of Tastes on the Fly. “It represents the next evolution of James Beard-award winning chef Alex Seidel’s vision of approachability and transparency in dining. He invites us to appreciate the craft that goes into making a delicious Colorado experience.”

The concept’s horseshoe bar has 28 seats serving 20 wines by the glass, with the focal point being a Cruvinet Wine System, which allows guests to taste select wines kept fresh by a patented preservation system. In addition, the draft beers are 100 percent local Colorado brews and the cocktails



**Above, Right:** OTG opened Q in Terminal E at Houston’s George Bush Intercontinental Airport in 2017. The bar portion carries a heavy emphasis on brown spirits, which is reflected on the beverage menu as well as in the design of the impressive bar, which is shaped to resemble copper column stills.





include some of the most popular drinks from the Union Station location, plus a variety of signature cocktails.

At **Nashville International Airport (BNA)**, **Delaware North** operates Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, a bar and music venue that's been a staple streetside for more than 60 years. The airport location first opened in 2017 then underwent an extensive renovation for 10 months, reopening in October 2020. In 2017, *Airport Experience News* named it Airport Restaurant Bar of the Year.

"Among Delaware North's portfolio of North American airport bars, Tootsie's Orchid Lounge stands out as the most innovative and successful," says Don Graham, Delaware North's general manager at BNA. "It's truly the heart and soul of Nashville's honky tonk scene, renowned for featuring live music tied to top musical talent in the city, creating a vibrant atmosphere for travelers."

According to Graham, Tootsie's is projected to generate more than \$8 million annually, and as of press time it holds the record for the highest monthly sales of any food and beverage unit at BNA in the past six months. The menu includes food from the local restaurants Swett's and Whitt's Barbecue, plus an array of beverage options, with sales evenly split between food and beverage.

"What sets Tootsie's Orchid Lounge apart from other airport bars is its status as an iconic establishment that showcases country music," Graham adds. "Its association with renowned artists - including country music

**Below:** At Nashville International Airport, Delaware North operates Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, modeled after the renowned bar and music venue that's been a staple of the city's country music scene for more than 60 years.



**Left, Below:** High Flying Foods prefers to partner with local celebrated brands rather than national names, and New Belgium Brewing in Concourse B at Denver International Airport is a prime example of that.



legends like Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Loretta Lynn and Hank Williams Jr. - and its commitment to delivering exceptional live performances make it a unique destination for travelers seeking a taste of Nashville's vibrant music scene."

Even for proprietary concepts, reflecting the region is, of course, a top priority.

"Book & Bourbon Southern Kitchen pays homage to Kentucky's deep and rich bourbon heritage, making the airport not just a gateway to this historic region, but also a highly visible platform for showcasing the state's renowned bourbon distilling heritage and products for visitors from all over the world," HMSHost's Pitman says.

OTG's Blatstein points out that the menu at Q features locally sourced ingredients

where possible, while the beer program is also dedicated to championing local, authentic craft brands, featuring a range of local breweries like 11 Below Brewing, 8th Wonder, Deep Ellum, Eureka Heights, Galveston Island, Karbach, Real Ale, Saint Arnold, Shiner and Saloon Door.

Similarly, Paradies Lagardère's Beercode is focused on local breweries. "Beercode isn't a plug-and-play brand with identical menus across the board, but a fantastic representation of the local beer community in which each restaurant resides," Guillaume says. "A great example of this is in San Antonio, where 85 percent of our drafts are craft beer, with 60 percent of those are brewed right in Texas, including options by Freetail, Ranger Creek Brewing & Distilling, and Austin Eastsiders." ■