

Barnett on Business Travel: Asheville's Irish pub is a haven for all

by *Chris_Barnett*

ASHEVILLE, N.C. - Take equal parts of Berkeley, Calif., Santa Fe, N.M., Boulder, Colo., and Seattle, put them in blender and flip the switch. You have Asheville, a North Carolina mountain town well worth a visit if you're in the arts as a buyer, seller or aficionado, or looking for a place where friendliness and fair prices trumps arrogance and astronomical markups.

I consider a good local bar as a barometer of a town's soul, a key index for business travelers who see life as more than dealmaking and a commission on the close. I think I found one.

It's 5:30 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon and the warm, woodsy, cozy pub is starting to fill up with the apres work crowd. CPAs and carpenters. Attorneys and artists. Doctors and designers. Seated at the walnut bar, local sculptor John Payne, one husky hand wrapped around a pint of handcrafted Green Man Ale, is chatting with Kevin Hogan, a painter. Payne will probably stick around, have a bowl of clam chowder and listen to a little fiddle music.

"This is Asheville's living room," muses Payne. "No smoking, no blaring TV. You can actually have a conversation in here plus they own a brewery. It's wonderful."

Welcome to Jack Of The Wood (www.jackofthewood.com), a decade-old Celtic saloon with the welcoming spirit of a 200-year-old Irish village pub.

"We're a true public house," says Joe Culpepper, who's been working behind the horseshoe shaped bar for a long time. "Whether you're 21 or 71, nobody's a stranger here. You just sit down and feel at home."

Here in Asheville, a hip hamlet of 72,000, Jack of the Wood is a lot more than an Irish pub. Besides the 12 or so draft beers, half of them brewed just down the street, and the requisite fish and chips and shepherd's pie with hefty portions for \$9, there is long list of single-malt Scotches and fine bourbons at exceptionally fair prices. Plus a menu of eclectic dishes.

For something more exotic, a sharp departure from western North Carolina gastronomy, there's The Laughing Seed, a high tone vegetarian restaurant that bills itself as an "international spice cafe" with its own cocktail bar. Jack's owners, Joe and Joan Eckert, also own the Seed, which is conveniently located above the pub.

The Eckerts are in chapter two of their lives. Joe grew up in an Irish neighborhood in Philly and became a landscape architect; however, he had the vision to see that Asheville, a one-time depressed Appalachian burg, would soon morph into a cool little arts and bluegrass music enclave, complete with galleries, espresso shops and yoga studios. They opened up the Laughing Seed in 1991.

"But I wanted to create a place where locals and strangers could gather," says Eckert. "While I'm half Irish, we built the pub before I ever went to Ireland. It's in the genes."

But there's more to the story, just five blocks away. That's the home of Green Man, the brewery Eckert started, appropriating the name and leafy face of the mythological Green Man, which was the male deity counterpart to the Goddess of Fertility. The Green Man dates back to the second century and adorns churches and cathedrals throughout Europe. Often, the Green Man, who was fabled in forest folklore was called Jack. Hence the pub name Jack of the Wood, where you can also get a pint of Green Man Porter, a potent Belgian-style dark and malty ale, for \$3.50.

Jack Of The Wood is a bastion of tradition and good manners. There is a dartboard, but no fireplace. Women, solo or with friends, sit at the bar and unwanted suitors don't even think of making a pass.

"This is a safe, friendly place for women," insists Eckert. "Like being with family."

Pub Manager Andrew Beekman keeps an eye out for unwanted passes.

You don't see many trendy cocktails sliding across the bar, either. Libational fare is either pints, choice Scotches or bourbons served neat-in a rocks glass without the ice and a water chaser if requested. Prices are amazingly restrained. A Maker's Mark or Woodford Reserve bourbon is \$5.50 to \$6.50, while 12-year-old Glenmorangie Port Wood finish Highland single malt Scotch is \$9.

"We're not really a Manhattan, martini or Cosmopolitan place," says Culpepper.

Upstairs, though, you can get organic vodka mixed with fruit, herb and spice elixirs.

Eckert might have styled the pub after his Irish roots, but he pays homage to his current hometown every Wednesday night with impromptu jams. Anyone who plays old-time Appalachia music and has a fiddle, banjo, guitar or bass can get up on stage.

"They just show up and play," says Austin Tyler, a local commercial real estate broker who comes in with his lady friend for a Green Man pale ale, \$3.50, the baked crab, spinach and artichoke dip, \$8, or the garlic, rosemary and cheese fries with veggie chili, \$5. "It's comfortable and reasonable."

And no cover charge weekdays, either. On weekends, there's a mix of local and visiting Celtic and Scottish rock bands as well as bluegrass groups with a cover charge of \$5 to \$8.

Tyler's joined by an eclectic group of Jack of the Wood devotees that include writers, photographers, designers, metal benders, retired Fortune 500 CEOs and others who don't drink to excess or impress. No Jell-O shooters here.

But I am impressed that Eckert will pour you a glass of California's tony Manzanita Canyon cabernet sauvignon for \$4.50 a glass, or a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale for \$3.50. Plenty of thirst parlors would double or triple those tariffs and feel no shame.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and hassles.

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