

Bars and beers heading south



Aubrey Buckingham

While restaurant operators border on obsession when it comes to seeking that elusive X-factor, less thought seems to go into creating bars. Far too often someone gets a lease on a space, buys a few cases of booze and decides to call it a bar.

While this doesn't mean everyone should run out and start a theme pub, the more successful joints in town have demonstrated clearly that at least someone spent more than five minutes working out a concept.

Given the lack of planning, curiously two venues have opened in downtown Puxi this week with a common thread linking them — the United States' south. While Southern Belle is obviously gunning for this market, not many people would recognize the Boxing Cat Brewery as one of the more inviting gastropubs for southern comfort.

While first thoughts of the Deep South conjure up images of cotton fields, jazz and the Confederacy, the elegant south is a theme that has often gone unexplored — at least till now.

Occupying the short-lived Effigie Cafe on Changle Road and round the corner from Xiangyang Road, this 115-square-meter bar is offering southern-style cocktails, hearty sandwiches and tasty desserts to punters looking to while the occasional evening away.

Cigar-chomping general

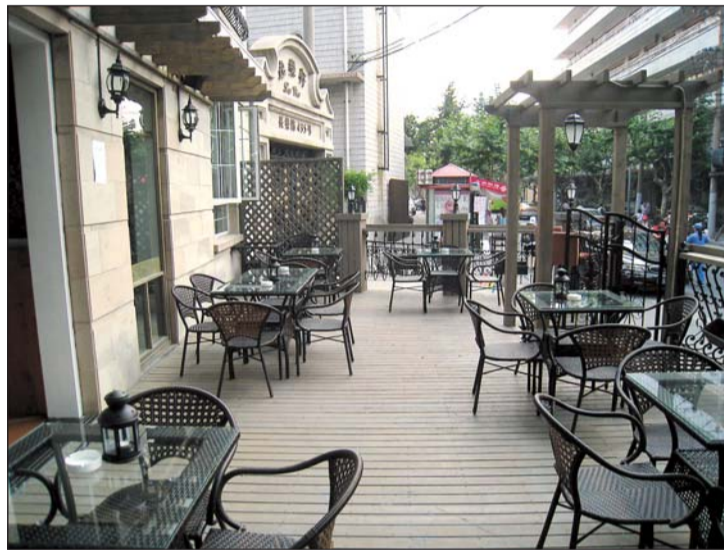
manager Sean Fitzgerald recounts the process that went into the bar's southern theme. "We (the investors) thought 'How about the south?' Is it the (Florida) Keys? New Orleans? Honky-tonk or cowboy? One day in the shower it occurred to me — honky-tonk and the elegant south."

The place Fitzgerald and his team designed has different elements — a 20-seat relaxed veranda complete with rocking chairs so that one can watch the traffic go by, a Texas-style five-star bar, an elegant Savannah parlor with fireplace and bookshelves where ladies might sip on cocktails and sample the delicious pastries, and a honky-tonk area in the back for men to down tankards of beer and get rowdy over an eclectic mix of southern music.

While the southern theme is adhered to throughout (the bar's logo even incorporates the stars of the seven secessionist states), Fitzgerald points out there is no desire to shove the region's military history in punters' faces (presumably because the Boston native's side eventually won that spat).

The food menu is simple, with an array of sandwiches from 40 yuan (US\$5.85) to 60 yuan (including a make-your-own option coming soon) and some homemade southern treats like pecan pie (30 yuan). Cocktails are the primary focus of the drinks menu.

Designed by consulting



The Boxing Cat Brewery (above) is a gastro pub with homemade beer and Southern US comfort food, while Southern Belle (top and left) is an elegant bar offering small eats and Southern cocktails.

Englishman Alan Fulton, who is now at Bulldog Shanghai, the cleverly constructed concoctions ought to be instant crowd pleasers — even macho men can enjoy these colored drinks.

The Florida Hurricane is a tall, refreshing mix of vodka, rum and gin with tropical fruit juices (50 yuan) while the Lynchburg Lemonade (60 yuan) is bound to catch on with its combination of Jack Daniels, triple sec and fresh lemon juice.

Standard drinks will be offered in larger pours (40 milliliters) than most bars (a Jack Daniels, for example, costs 40 yuan) while

Fitzgerald plans to build a collection of bourbons over time. Two beers are currently on tap — Budweiser (30 yuan for half a liter) and Vedett.

If it's a cold brewski you are hankering for, however, then you owe it to yourself to check out the Boxing Cat Brewery. Infamously misspelled the Boxing Car when it opened in Minhang District, this sophomore outlet on Fuxing Road means beer lovers don't have to trek half the world away for Gary Heyne's exceptional brews.

The place is definitely about beer, beer and more beer. Most of

the larger volume stuff (ales, lagers) is still brewed in Minhang (the Box Cat Brewing produced about 2,500 liters of beer over the past year) and trucked over, while the smaller set-up in this handsome three-story building (ground-floor bar, second-floor dining and third-floor rec room) is used for small batches of more specialized creations, such as Russian Imperial Stouts. Beers start at 35 yuan for their generous half-pint (384ml), 45 yuan for their 591ml pint and a reasonable 100 yuan for a 1,627ml pitcher.

Anyone unfamiliar with the Texan's liquid gold has, simply put, been living under a rock for the past few years. Initially at Bund brew house Henry's in 2006, the beer master (who worked in Iraq as a private contractor purifying water before coming to Shanghai) opened his own microbrewery with business partner Kelley Lee last year, his skill at making beer the *yin* to Lee's culinary *yang*.

The sizzling-hot Southern Californian's (she also co-owns Closed Door and the immensely popular Cantina Agave) menu is more than adequate in sharing the limelight with the larger-than-life Texan, emphatically putting the gastro in gastro pub.

"We're going to make something fiery and Cajun and that home comfort food feeling you can't get here. The fiery aspect really helps the beer go down right? We're quite strong on both ends," she says.

Lee's menu is unpretentious and hearty, featuring what Heyne dubs "I-10" food, after the Interstate-10 freeway that spans the southern US. Peckish lager louts can sink their teeth into fried macaroni and cheese (45 yuan), Creole home-smoked ham (85 yuan) and house-smoked BBQ ribs (125 yuan), a new addition to the BCB repertoire.

While Lee maintains her hands-on approach, she has also brought in two new faces to her stable — Chicago lad Michael Solovey and pastry chef Davis Liu, who has his own pastry kitchen in the brewery annex. Bread and pastries are made fresh every day, while the kitchen smokes its own meats and brines its own briskets.

Neither Southern Belle nor Boxing Cat Brewing show sports, suggesting expats are already tired of bars built around the latest game of the day. Whether it be over a tasty cocktail at the former or an ice-cold brew at the latter, it looks like downtown bars are set to stall the art of conversation going South and welcome it back into the fold.

Southern Belle
Address: 433 Changle Rd
Boxing Cat Brewing
Address: 82 Fuxing Rd W.

