

CRAFT **Beer & Brewing** Magazine

BREWING INDUSTRY GUIDE // WINTER 2019

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CASE STUDY

MOODY TONGUE

In this era of stripped-down industrial taprooms and food trucks, Moody Tongue's classy new Dining Room offers \$155 pairing menus. Behind the scenes: a brewer who thinks like a chef, and a chef who drinks like a brewer. **BY JOE STANGE**

THE BEER NAMES READ LIKE one of those luridly descriptive restaurant menus, complete with verbs that describe violent things that happened to the ingredients: Sliced Nectarine IPA, Freeze Dried Black Lime Wit, Toasted Rice Lager, Pressed Asian Pear Saison.

The names are a reflection of Brewmaster Jared Rouben's culinary approach to beer. Even the name of the brewery—Moody Tongue—refers to someone with a critical palate. It fits: Rouben was a chef before he was a brewer.

In November, Rouben and cousin Jeremy Cohn took the culinary approach further when they opened two restaurants—and that's the right word; these are not taprooms or brewpubs—attached to their new brewery location in Chicago's South Loop. Joining them is Executive Chef Jared Wentworth, whose previous Chicago restaurants earned a Michelin star nine times—seven at Longman & Eagle, followed by two at Dusek's Board & Beer.

The new location is familiar to Chicago drinkers: It used to be the home of Bad-erbräu, the revivalist lager brewery that shut in 2018. Moody Tongue has used the 4,000-square-foot space to expand brewing, moving from their previous location in the nearby Pilsen neighborhood, and to install the restaurants: The Dining Room and The Bar. Wentworth runs the kitchen for both.

The 28-seat Dining Room hosts two seatings each night, at 6 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Its 12-course tasting menu, priced at \$155 per person, is seasonal and includes a beer pairing for each course—plus a bottomless flute of their Aperitif Pilsner, to keep fresh. The Bar, meanwhile, has lower prices—say, \$16 for an elaborate pimiento-cheeseburger with beef-fat fries—but is no less impressive in its aspirations.

A press release describes their ambition: They aim “to present one of the most unique food and beer pairing experiences in the world.”

The creative engine that fuels the experience is the partnership between Rouben the brewer and Wentworth the chef and the feedback that flows freely between them.

“He’s putting out incredible food, and it forces you to put exceptional beer out there,” Rouben says. The two are constantly tasting each other’s creations and getting new ideas from them—for ingredients, for combinations, for pairings.

One example: Wentworth tasted Rouben’s bourbon barrel-aged barleywine and said, “Oh, this is going to be my reduction sauce.” Then Wentworth appropriated the barrel and took it a step further. “He bought 300 pounds of cherry bomb peppers,” Rouben says, “put them in that barleywine barrel, fermented them, and now he makes our hot sauces.”

Another example: Rouben says he had no intention of brewing a hazy IPA until

Wentworth called him from Cape Cod, where he was visiting family and drinking a bunch of them. “And we’ve got it paired with lobster, and that’s because of his experience. And to me, that’s just exciting. It’s exciting. You get to explore with him.”

“He loves beer just as much as I love food, and that’s what makes all this work.”

THE BREWER WHO WAS A CHEF

Rouben is originally from Louisville, Kentucky. For college he moved to St. Louis to attend Washington University, where he majored in business. While there, he took a nighttime food-writing course with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* food critic, the late Joe Bonwich—an experience that would change Rouben’s trajectory: “It was the first time that I was surrounded by people who just wanted to talk about food and beverage, and I didn’t feel like a crazy person.”

He followed that passion for food to the Culinary Institute of America. When he started there, he found that he wasn’t allowed to join the wine club, the Bacchus Wine Society; there was a minimum GPA, and he hadn’t been issued any grades yet. The club also cost money to join. So instead, Rouben and classmate Shannon Morrison founded the CIA’s first Brew Club. “And everything was free, and it was for any GPA,” Rouben says. “And that club is still there today.”

After graduating from CIA, Rouben moved to California’s Napa Valley, where he worked in the kitchen of Michelin-starred Martini House in St. Helena. Napa was a fertile playground for Rouben, who tasted all the wines and produce he could find. “I mean, the farmer’s market in Napa,” he says, “it’s nature’s candy.” In the kitchen and at the market, Rouben says he was “just using a chef’s mindset to explore ingredients and aromatics.”

Rouben later moved to New York to work at Thomas Keller’s Per Se restaurant. His love of beer began to spill into the dining room. “It got to the point where I was at

FROM LEFT » Moody Tongue
Founder Jared Rouben
and Executive Chef Jared
Wentworth



this three-Michelin-star restaurant, and I was just the guy talking about beer." On his days off, meanwhile, he worked at Chelsea Craft Brewing Company in the Bronx. He spent a lot of time there cleaning. He soon realized that he enjoyed cleaning the brew-house more than working at the restaurant—which he took as a signal that he had to pursue brewing professionally.

He then moved to Chicago to attend the Siebel Institute of Technology and complete its diploma course. That also gave him the chance to study at Doemens in Munich and get to know German beer, an experience that—as with many other Siebel grads—made a lasting impression.

After graduation, he worked for a year at Chicago's Rock Bottom brewpub before landing a job at Goose Island. Eleven months later, the company named him brewmaster of its brewpubs, including the original on Clybourn. Rouben would brew at Goose Island for three and a half years. He says that Founder John Hall and his son and then-Brewmaster Greg Hall both treated him "exceptionally well."

They also encouraged his culinary side. While at Goose Island, Rouben launched the brewery's Chef Collaboration Series. It included beers such as Marisol, conceived with Chef Rick Bayless: a Belgian-style golden ale brewed with green tea, coriander, and citrus peel. "So I had the opportunity to work with all these fantastic chefs, who were very different in their cuisine and their palate," Rouben says. "Being able to talk in the language of food, which is something we all have in common—we've been eating since we were born—we were able to build recipes together."

While working with the chefs, Rouben further developed his thinking about how to talk about and describe beers. "I wouldn't use words like 'Maris Otter' because that doesn't mean anything to anybody," he says. "I would use words like 'English biscuit.'"

Meanwhile these were the city's top chefs, and in Rouben's mind the beers had to meet the same high standard. "There was no room for error," he says. "So the expecta-



The Bar at Moody Tongue

tion level was always high. And these chefs introduced me to great artisanal producers.

"All of this is because of the Chicago culinary community; they were so warm and welcoming. I mean, the chefs in Chicago, they love to drink beer."

Rouben left Goose Island in 2014 to start Moody Tongue. To do it he joined forces with his Texan cousin, Jeremy Cohn. Rouben is president and brewmaster, while Cohn is the CEO. They opened their Tasting Room in the Pilsen neighborhood in 2016, and their South Loop restaurants opened three years later. "I got to focus on beer and brewing," Rouben says, "and he got to focus on his passion, which is building a business."

THE RESEARCH TRIP

Before developing the menus at The Dining Room and The Bar, Rouben and Wentworth traveled together to Belgium and France to look for ideas and inspiration—to have fun, sure, but also to pay attention to the food, the ingredients, the drinks, and the service. "I think it's so important to spend time with your partners,"

Rouben says. "And to be able to do that overseas is an incredible luxury."

Chef Wentworth, Rouben says, "is an incredible student—obviously, a professor as well—but just like me, a student for life. I think it's important to find inspiration anywhere you can, and Belgium and France were quite easy for both of us."

The inevitable bonding from that trip has been a benefit to their partnership and their business, Rouben says. "It's important that you get close and that you understand not just each other, but each other's palate. I think as a result it's affected us or inspired us. There's not a day that goes by that we don't laugh at a story. It's one thing to read about it. It's another thing to experience it."

Belgian highlights included drinking witbier while snacking at a seafood stall and buying every saison they could find and tasting them attentively. One of the dishes they enjoyed most was carbonnade (or *stoofvlees*, in Dutch), a braised-beef stew cooked with dark ale. It's a dish that can now often be found on the menu at Moody Tongue—except Wentworth does it with pig cheeks, carrots, chanterelle mushrooms, pureed potatoes, and bacon. "Chef brought that dish and made his own touch with it," Rouben says. "My guess is that without that trip, I don't know if that dish would exist."

What would Rouben pair with that carbonnade? Maybe his Brûléed Banana Dunkel Weizen Bock. "Because that carbonnade is fall, and that's exactly where we are right now." He says the beer has an

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aroma of bananas foster, and “it’s medium-bodied, and that’s what we want when the cold weather starts to set in.”

Meanwhile, he says his big takeaways from Belgium were mussels and chocolate. Eating mussels cooked in witbier was an “a-ha moment” for him. “And I love chocolate, I’m obsessed with chocolate. There’s something decadent and indulgent and rewarding about chocolate in beer.”

In France, there were two Paris experiences that made a strong impression on Rouben. They happened at restaurants where the food was terrific—that was a given—but the hospitality and service were exceptional. One was at the two-Michelin-star David Toutain, where the servers knew the stories behind the food. “You have to be knowledgeable, and you have to be able to share that knowledge in a story format,” he says. “It has to be fun. I’d like to think the backbone of Moody Tongue is hospitality and service.”

The other was at Le Chateaubriand, where Rouben watched in amazement at the pacing, speed, and efficiency of the service. “You have the opportunity to take care of somebody for multiple hours, and you have to take care of them,” he says. “It showed me that you could have the best food, but it doesn’t have to be five hours. You have to take advantage of the time you have with people, and you have to make it count.”

Rouben also loved visiting the markets in France and sampling the produce.

“That inspired me to explore a couple of directions,” he says. “The fruit in France made me want to explore beers with the same aromatics and flavors.”

WHAT TO EAT (AND DRINK)?

If you walked into The Bar at Moody Tongue tomorrow for a beer and a bite to eat, Rouben would probably start you out with his Aperitif Pilsner. “There’s no better way for a brewer to build trust than to brew a great pilsner,” he says. “For me it’s the beginning. It’s a welcoming beverage, and that’s exactly what an aperitif should be. You say, ‘Yeah, I could feel comfortable here.’ And you feel welcome.”

Rouben says he loves the challenge of brewing a balanced German-style pilsner. “It’s a beverage I’m always working on, and will always be working on, because there’s no room for error.” He paraphrases Thomas Keller: “It should be difficult to put down your fork.” As brewers, “I think we should make it difficult for the guest to put down the glass. I think the benchmark for any great beer is that you want to have more than one. For Moody Tongue beers, balance is the key, and the fun part is achieving that with flavor and aromatics.”

If you’re enjoying that beer and want



another, Rouben might then nudge you toward ordering the skillet-fried chicken with black-truffle cavatelli. If you’re feeling spendy, in fact, you could pair that with a five-ounce Champagne flute of the Shaved Black Truffle Pilsner (\$25). Or you could stay on the Aperitif.

In Moody Tongue’s Dining Room, on the other hand, you might ponder the 12-course menu. You might also see that the last two, three, or four dishes are all desserts.

Rouben says that’s one of the advantages of having a fixed menu: It takes the question of whether to order dessert out of your hands. “The pastry chefs are brilliant, and they don’t get a chance to show off what they can do because if people are going to deprive themselves of anything, it’s going to be dessert,” he says. “But not having a meal with dessert feels like not having beer with a head. You’re missing something.”

ABOUT THOSE BEER NAMES...

The experience of walking down the beer aisle these days can be disorienting—lots of dazzling colors and strange names trying to get our attention. It’s not always obvious what we’re going to taste. “It’s like walking down a fireworks display,” Rouben says. “There are so many options, especially in this golden age of beer. It’s overwhelming.”

The idea behind Moody Tongue’s beer names, he says, is transparency. They don’t always have the named foods as ingredients; the idea is to signal to drinkers what they’re going to taste. The Sliced Nectarine IPA originally did have nectarines in it ... but Rouben later decided to leave them out. The descriptor still fits. “We really try to stick to that paradigm, to let guests know what they’re going to experience.”

Five years into the Moody Tongue culinary-beer experiment, Rouben has this advice for fellow brewers: “Celebrate your daily victories. I don’t think we celebrate the daily victories enough.”

“To celebrate each day is so important because it goes by too fast. And we’re fortunate to do what we love.”

The Dining Room at Moody Tongue

