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There's much to love -- house-made brews, tasty burgers -- at Libertyville's Mickey Finn's



Waitress Kelley Palmer delivers drinks to customers at Mickey Finn's in Libertyville.

Gilbert R. Boucher II | Staff Photographer

By Suzanne M. Brazil
Daily Herald Correspondent

Brian Grano had zero restaurant experience when he purchased Libertyville's Mickey Finn's Brewery back in 2004. A decade later, he moved Mickey Finn's half a block north into a renovated, 15,000-square-foot historic building, allowing him to put his own stamp on Lake County's largest microbrewery and Illinois' oldest brewpub.

Motif: The striking, exposed trusses of a 98-year-old barrel roof, original exposed brick walls and concrete floor anchor the urban industrial design. A custom-built, solid oak 60-foot bar with 26 tap handles and high-back,

studded bar stools, spans the entire length of the main dining room. Glossy wood tables, chairs and high-back booths provide seating for 175 with another 65 seats, and a popular fire pit, in the adjacent beer garden. The upcoming addition of a louvered roof system and infrared heating will allow customers to comfortably enjoy the outdoor space during all but the two coldest months of the year.

The main dining area includes a new sound system and a stage located near the entrance, along with flexible floor space for dancing based on scheduled entertainment. Chicago sports, including full sound for every Blackhawks game, can be enjoyed on any of 13 massive flat-screen TVs. Garage-style doors and two large ceiling fans add to the industrial feel. A black-and-white mural (photo circa 1914) of the Libertyville One Mile Race Track reflects both the local angle and the pub's motto "Life, Libertyville, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Food: Mickey Finn's offers traditional pub favorites as well as dinner entrees including brisket smoked in-house and grilled salmon. New menu items include gluten-free pizza, gluten-free organic beef burgers and additional healthy salad options.

A large selection of appetizers features Finn's own Irish Eggrolls stuffed with corned beef and sauerkraut, spicy brisket empanadas and the popular Blarney Balls -- deep-fried with garlic, cheddar, bacon and mashed potatoes. We chose beer nuggets served with a tangy red sauce and spicy cheese. The generous portion of flaky, deep-fried dough was tossed in a mixture of butter, parsley, Parmesan and garlic. We also opted for the retro cheesy artichoke dip with pita wedges. The dish was served hot and bubbly, topped with a golden brown crust. Goey and delicious.

Finn's was the only suburban brewpub, and one of only four in the entire Chicago area, to be honored in Zagat's 2014 edition of "Between the Bun -- Must Try Burgers Across the Country." So we had to give them a try. The Mickey burger features nine ounces of hand-formed, locally sourced beef on a fluffy egg bun and the Minnie, at six ounces, is a smaller version. Both burgers were well-seasoned, juicy and cooked to order, then served with a tasty pile of hot, crisp fries.

Food specials include a kids-eat-free promotion on Tuesday nights and two-for-one burgers (two-beer minimum) on Wednesdays.

Liquid consumption: Two weeks after Grano signed the deal as the new owner, the original brewer gave notice and was gone within a few weeks. Grano quickly hired Greg Browne, of Australia, and 10 years later he still oversees the brewing process -- and the award-winning, house-made brew continues to draw aficionados.

The Gudenteit Hefeweizen is a German-style wheat ale, and, as the first beer ever brewed at Finn's, remains one of their most popular. We sampled the slightly darker Gudendark Dunkel-Weizen. This limited-availability brew with hints of caramel and chocolate came served in a 22-ounce glass and was a good value at \$6.50. The bar also offers a full menu of cocktails and martinis.

Crowd: We arrived at 9 p.m. on a Saturday and were seated after a five-minute wait. The energetic crowd, dressed in summer casual shorts and jeans, quickly grew to standing-room-only at the bar, but the open atmosphere never felt stuffy or crowded.

Music: Live music is offered with no cover charge every Friday and Saturday night, and the occasional Thursday. Grano selects the performers himself, skewing edgier on Friday and more mainstream on Saturday.

Service: Our server was fast, friendly and attentive without being intrusive. She easily fielded craft beer questions and delivered all items as ordered in a reasonable time. The operation is truly a family affair with Grano and his

wife, Jetta, managing or on-site frequently, including the night we visited.

Parking: About 140 free spaces are available behind the building, in public lots and on the street. The village has approved a new 340-spot garage on the public lot, scheduled for construction in 2016.

Overall: Sports fans, music lovers, families and anyone looking for an upscale pub experience can find something to enjoy at this favorite local destination.