

NightLife



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At Rustico in Arlington, Brooke Johnson, left, Diana Adams and her husband, R. Adams, sample some of the bar's 40 draft beers. This month Rustico will put holiday beers into its rotation.

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Toasting the season with special brews

BY FRITZ HAHN

For me, there's no better time to be a beer lover than Christmas. Brewers around the globe craft rich, spicy ales that are perfect for cold winter evenings. (These beers tend to be much higher in alcohol than usual, which is why you feel so warm after finishing one.)

You'll find bars across the area offering special seasonal selections, whether a strong Belgian ale, a dark and malty English "winter warmer" or even the Winter White wheat beer from Michigan's Bell's Brewery. But some places are going well beyond that this holiday season with strong draft lineups and even themed holiday parties.

Eat Bar

2761 Washington Blvd., Arlington. 703-778-9961. www.eat-bar.com.

Eat Bar (and its neighboring restaurant, Tallula) isn't known for its beer selections. Wine? Sure. And Eat Bar's convivial gastropub has become a favorite neighborhood hangout.

But Greg Engert, the beer director for sister restaurants ChurchKey and Rustico, among others, has come up with a project called the Holiday Draft Series, which will add extra-special beers to Eat Bar's usual lineup all month, including Mikkeller's Santa's Little Helper, a Danish showstopper made with orange peel, coriander and chocolate malt, and the dark, spicy Noel des Geants from Belgium. Expect five or so seasonal drafts at any one time.

The bar is getting even further into the holiday spirit this Sunday, when the usual weekly movie night — which includes

movies on all the TVs and free gourmet popcorn and snacks — becomes an Ugly Sweater Party. Wear your worst holiday sweater to watch "A Christmas Story" while sipping Spiked Peppermint Patty Cocoa, and you could win a replica of the tacky leg lamp that plays a prominent role in the film. Admission, as always, is free, and the film starts at 8 p.m.



St. Bernardus is a Belgian Christmas ale featured at Rustico this month. The bar stocks about 400 kinds of bottled beer.

Rustico

4075 Wilson Blvd., Arlington. 571-384-1820. www.rusticorestaurant.com.

Rustico's Alexandria bar is one of the area's better-known beer destinations, but the Ballston branch, which opened the last week of October, might be set to overtake its sibling. The selection is much larger —

40 drafts, 400 bottles. The chairlike bar stools and high bar tables make for a comfortable after-work drink destination (beers are \$2 off between 4 and 7 p.m. on weekdays), and though the gleaming bar top and muted colors make it seem like an attractive date spot, be warned: The bar can be deafeningly loud when there's a full house. (The dining room is quieter; I'd try to get the tables near the roaring fireplace.)

Throughout December, Rustico will be rotating many holiday beers onto its taps — at least three or four at a time. Among the highlights, according to beer director Engert (who's also curating Eat Bar's list), are Santa Bee, a fruity, funky Belgian brew made with honey, and the malty, "snappily bitter" Enghien Noel from Brasserie de Sillery.

Pizzeria Paradiso

3282 M St. NW. 202-337-1245; 2003 P St. NW. 202-223-1245; 124 King St., Alexandria. 703-837-1245. www.eatyourpizza.com.

Over the summer, Pizzeria Paradiso beer director Greg Jasgur created his own "July-PA" festival, putting hoppy India Pale Ale beers on all the taps at the Georgetown and Dupont Circle locations. Starting Monday, he's pulling a similar stunt with seasonal Christmas beers.

For Year's End Jubilation, Jasgur promises 42 beers will be on at all three restaurants, and he doesn't think there will be any overlap between locations. Among the choice offerings will be the Great Lakes Christmas Ale, which has sold out at every bar it has appeared; a cask of Oliver's warming Merry Ole Ale from Baltimore; and two versions of the sweet, potent Scaldis Noel (a personal favorite).

The full lists are/will be posted on the restaurants' Web site, Eatyourpizza.com, so you can see if you'd prefer one Paradiso location over the others. (In cold weather, I'm hoping for a warm spot in front of the Alexandria location's bar-side fireplace.)

Galaxy Hut

2711 Wilson Blvd., Arlington. 703-525-8646. www.galaxyhut.com.

Galaxy Hut has made the move from an indie-rock concert venue to an indie-rock venue with one of the area's finest draft lineups. While Galaxy Hut usually offers a couple of seasonal beers in December and January, owner Lary Hoffmann is going all out this year. The Winter Beer Takeover features seasonal selections on all 20 of the bar's taps starting Tuesday. "I have 20 taps, but we have more beers than that," Hoffmann says. "The first keg that kicks will be backed up by another Christmas beer."

Hoffmann has been stocking up on seasonal beers for months. Some will sneak on before Tuesday, including Lights Out, from the Blue Mountain Brewery in Afton, Va.; Anderson Valley's Winter Solstice; and Scaldis Noel. Beers to look out for: Hoffmann has one 30-liter keg of Samichlaus, the hard-to-find Austrian Christmas beer that's brewed only one day a year, and, he boasts, two of the four kegs of Schlafly Christmas Ale that made it to Northern Virginia. With so many styles next to one another, it's a great way to explore a variety of winter beers.

Galaxy Hut regulars who'd rather have a Dale's Pale Ale or Green Flash instead of a holiday beer have nothing to fear: Hoffmann is stocking some of the bar's popular drafts perennials in bottles for the duration.

fritz.hahn@washingtontimes.com

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