

Wisconsin On-Premise Profile

By Jennifer A. Gritt

Ravens: Filling the Void in Appleton

Trapped in the green and gold shadow of Green Bay, WI, one would think the bar scene in downtown Appleton would only cater to beer-drinking sports fans. And for the most part it does. But with the construction of a new performing arts center on College Avenue, Appleton's nightlife began seeking alternatives to the standard array of frosty malted beverages and big screen TVs. Luckily they didn't have to go far. At Ravens - one of Appleton's most recent additions - patrons will discover a beverage drinking experience like no other.

When owners Clint Genett and Jeff Lang decided back in 2001 that they wanted to introduce something new to Appleton's downtown strip they weren't kidding. Stylized after some of the most popular urban retreats in Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, and Dallas, Ravens was to be designed with one purpose in mind - customer service. Drawing from extensive bartending backgrounds, Genett and Lang sought to fill what they agreed was missing in Appleton's bar scene. "We've worked bars in Appleton," Genett explained, "I've worked bars in

Necnah [WI]. We just saw them get repetitive." "I think the idea," he continued, "was to bring some of the cool things Jeff's had a chance to see [from] traveling a lot, and some ideas that we had together, and try and pull it off in Appleton."

Upon mapping out the concept they were shooting for - a sofa-decked urban lounge which specialized in serving champagne, wine, and martinis - the next step for the owners was to find a building. With several vacancies scattered along College Avenue, Genett and Lang had numerous options to choose from. Fortunately for them, the first building Lang viewed was right on the mark. "I walked in, and the layout was what we needed," he stated.

Transforming the former photog-

raphy studio into a hip urban night spot would prove a daunting task for anyone. Structurally the building

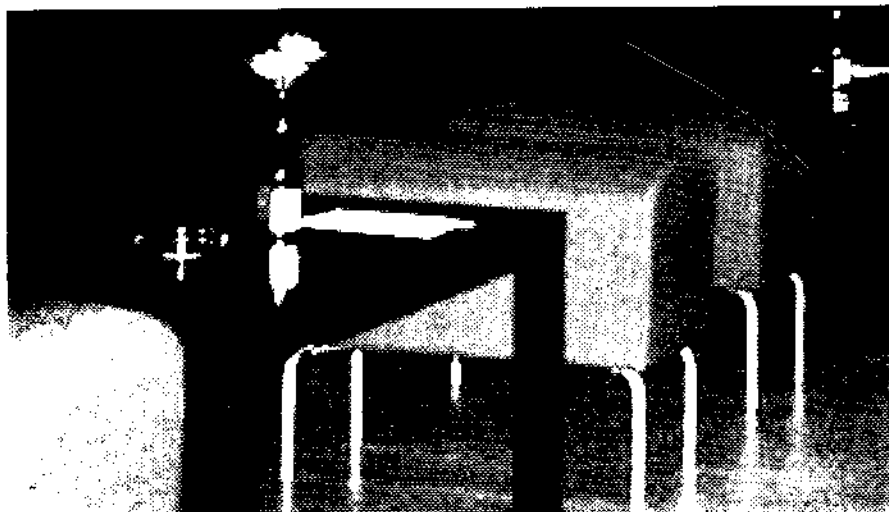
supported the vision Genett and Lang had in mind, but a complete renovation was necessary to make it a reality. While most bar owners could have spent six to eight months on construction, Ravens was completed in roughly three. The owners attributed the speed with which they built their bar to the

combined seventeen years of bartending and bar management experience between them. "Most people that have never been in this business have to struggle with inventory, staffing, equipment," Lang emphasized. "We did all that for years."

With the concept of Ravens hinging on strong customer service, putting together a solid crew of bartenders and servers was the next obstacle Genett and Lang had to overcome. The owners decided to run an ad in the local newspaper and were surprised when they suddenly received 170 applications. Determined to give each applicant an opportunity, however, the owners set up a booth and conducted 5 to 10 minute interviews. While bartending could be viewed as a favored part-time job in Appleton (Lawrence University straddles the eastern end of College Ave.), only a handful of applicants had what



Bartender, **Paige Yang** (left) with Co-Owner, **Clint Genett**



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Genett and Lang were looking for. Both owners agreed that their bartenders should have a minimum of 5 years bartending experience. "That's crucial," Genett explained. "We weren't going to brag up an eclectic drink menu ... without having the bartending talent to back it up."

After putting together a staff of seven, the owners were ready to go. All that was left was the approval of their liquor license by the Appleton city council - a process that was everything but smooth. The council initially felt there were too many bars along College Avenue already, and were reluctant to grant Genett and Lang the license. "The common council is the common council," Lang stressed. "They're going to always look out for what's best for the city. They don't want a proliferation of bars, but the marketplace is going to drive the marketplace and that's the name in business."

The goal of Ravens, he went on to emphasize, was to provide a service that no other bar in the area was providing. And when the common council finally approved Genett and Lang's license, there was nothing left to stand in the way of proving their point.

On August 15, 2002, Ravens opened its doors to the public for the first time and they opened with a bang. "We were stocking the shelves an hour before we were set to open," Genett recalled. "And we went through most of our inventory the first night," Lang concluded. But more importantly, business has been growing ever since.

The key to Ravens' success is its strong emphasis on customer service. "It's about ease and comfort," Genett emphasized. "It's about not having to reach over four people to order a drink. Sit back and relax, your drinks will be bright with you." Yet the owners acknowledge that without their talented crew, success would not have been as easy. "We

are very fortunate to have a lot of personality," Genett stated. "Everyone is so individually different that works here, but as a group they click amazingly."

While outgoing personalities and bartending experience are essential, staying on top of the latest trends is equally important. To achieve this, Genett and Lang not only monitor what's going around in the bar business world, they rely on staff input as well. "We get together at least every other week to review new products, what's in, what's out, what's working ... what suggestions have you heard," Genett pointed out. "It's a basic concept" Lang continued. "You have to stay on top of new products and know how to use them." The idea, the owners stress, is to keep it fresh. Having witnessed so many bars start strong and become stagnant, Genett has become a firm believer that "a bar should always be fine-tuning."

As for the future of Ravens, the owners are reluctant to share whether big changes are in store. "We make one promise," Genett emphasized, "and that's that we will do what we can to offer more and better service to our customers - always." Lang would only offer a sly hint. "Is there more to come from Ravens?" posing the question to himself. "Absolutely." The rest of us will just have to sit back - martini in hand - and wait and see.

Drink Recipes

Pineapple Nutcracker Martini

4 oz. Malibu

4 oz. Stoli Vanilla

Splash of pineapple

Trickle grenadine

(by bartender *Paige Yang*)

Citrus Mistress Martini

6 oz Stoli Ohranji

2 oz Triple Sec

Splash of sour

Splash of cranberry