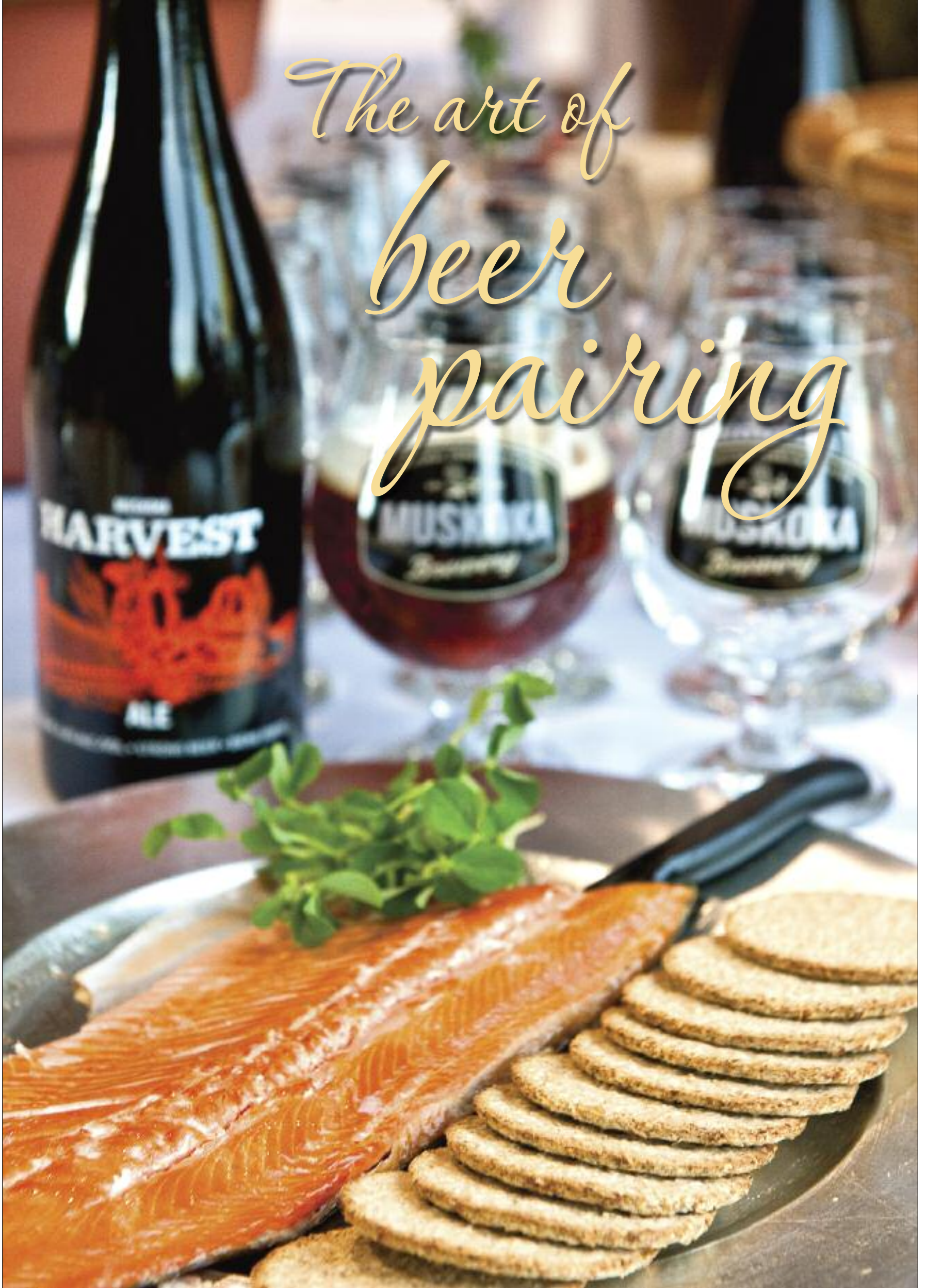


*The art of
beer
pairing*



**Article by Dianne Park Thach
Photographs by Kelly Holinshead**

If craft brewers had their way, it would be a beer list instead of a wine list you would open up at the table when choosing the perfect beverage to accompany your restaurant meal.

The sudsy brew has long been regarded as the preferred way to wash down chicken wings and pizza, but how about choosing it as a sipper to complement your filet mignon?

That's the type of thinking Bracebridge's Muskoka Brewery hoped to inspire at the recent launch of their seasonal harvest ale. Farmers, suppliers and brewers gathered at Brookland Farms to raise a glass of the ale in celebration of the end of the harvest season.

Mike Laba, Muskoka Brewery's marketing director, describes the evening as a toast to farmers as well as a toast to chefs who use as many local products as possible in their menus. Comprised of Ontario-grown malts and a blend of imported and local hops, the ale is available from September to November and its fuller-body is the perfect way to warm up from the cooler weather. Laba calls it "food-friendly" because of its ability to pair with many foods. Guests were invited to grab a chilled glass of it and sample it along with the different food stations set up around the barn.

It pairs well with pesto, curry and lamb dishes. The event goers were encouraged to enjoy it with Milford Bay trout as well as blue cheese, which Laba says is an unusual pairing for a beer.

Two local chefs were invited to create a special dish inspired by the ale. Chef Darren Hehir of Regatta Steak and Seafood Grille in Gravenhurst featured a beef dish with purple potato salad and shiitake mushroom puree. He used beef from Bliss Farms, baby heirloom carrots and honey from Brooklands Farm, and Roma tomatoes from his own garden.

The beef was poached in a four hour-long reduction of honey, maple syrup and the ale. Hehir created the dish after sampling the beer, getting an idea of its flavour profiles.

"I felt that the robustness of and the heaviness of the beer and the slight bitterness made me choose a neutral meat," he says. The earthy flavour of the shiitake mushroom matched the ale's bitterness and the honey and maple syrup's sweetness also helped counter it.

Chef David Friesen of Riverwalk in Bracebridge chose to feature a beef curry dish using meat from Winding Fences and produce from Brookland Farms. Cilantro and basil were picked from his garden, and he used a splash of the harvest ale in the pan to deglaze.

Curry is one of the suggested pairings by the brewery and Friesen was surprised at its reception. "I'm

Muskoka Brewery's Harvest Ale pairs well with the rich flavours of smoked trout (left).



Chef David Friesen prepares a curried beef dish for guests(above). Chef Darren Hehir's beef dish was created especially to go along with the Harvest Ale (below).





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Chef Guy Bedard of Taste at Touchstone believes adding beer to the recipe enhances the flavour and ensures that particular beer will pair well with the food.

not an Indian chef by any means but we had some Indian guests there and they came up to us and made some special comments," he says.

If you're a newcomer to the world of food and beer pairing and don't know where to start, Laba suggests beginning with beer colour. A darker beer will be a little heavier with a little more flavour so it goes best with heavier foods such as stew, chilli, and red meat.

If you have a copper, amber coloured beer such as their Muskoka Cream Ale, try it with ribs or pork tenderloin.

Light beers such as a lager or pilsner pair well with lighter fare like chicken and seafood. "By working with a colour, you'll start to figure out the flavours in the beer and the flavours in the food," says Laba.

There are also a couple beer ingredient principles that can help guide you. Hops contain aroma and bitterness and they cut through spice well. If you're eating a spicy dish and drinking a mainstream lager that doesn't have a whole lot of hops in it the dish will just continue to taste hotter and hotter.

"The hoppier the beer, the spicier the dish you can pair it with," says Laba. "It gives it balance." Taking chances with pairings is another good approach. "You can taste a beer and think about what it might go well with and just try it out."

They happened to stumble on the harvest ale pairing with blue cheese that was featured at the event. "I don't think anybody here would've thought that the ale would go well with the cheese. But one day we happened to have blue cheese lying around while sampling the harvest ale and we were pretty blown away by how well they went together."

If you're not feeling as adventurous at a restaurant, Hehir suggests reaching out to the chef. "If you have any inquiries about what you're pairing, ask the chef. Let them know what you're drinking and ask what would go well with it," he says.

Chef Guy Bedard of Taste at Touchstone on Lake

Muskoka agrees with Hehir. "Start by asking your server for food and beer suggestions," he says. "But you can always ask the chef. He or she will be able to make the match for you."

Bedard has created dishes with a particular beer in mind that he feels will pair well and likes to add a touch of it right in the cooking process.

He's made venison with the harvest ale, a demi-glaze dipping sauce that contained some Muskoka Craft Lager for prime rib sandwiches, and batter for pickerel featuring a splash of Muskoka Mad Tom IPA.

Using the beer in the recipe enhances the flavour and Bedard adds that each beer will also pair well when it comes to enjoying the dish. "Finding the right match with food and beer is essential because you don't want the two to clash, especially if you're working with delicate flavours," he says.

And if you have a favourite brewery that you'd like to try pairing with, head straight to the source, advises Friesen. "Talking to staff at a brewery is helpful. Have them walk you through their beer samplings to get your thinking about pairing options and ask questions," he says.

Muskoka Brewery created a handy beer and food pairing guide for their website for each of their brews. Laba says they want people to start thinking about beers differently. "There are a lot of people out there that are just getting their food and beer pairing feet wet so for the website we wanted to share our favourites."

Try pairing the popular Muskoka Cream Ale with a roasted chicken or Montreal smoked meat.

Their dark ale is a brown, bold ale and pairing it with steak is a staff pick. Its sweet flavours from roasted malts can also be paired with the nutty richness of a Brie or Camembert cheese.

The Muskoka Double Chocolate Cranberry Stout is a seasonal beer available from November to Febru-

ary and is rich with roasted dark chocolate malts, real cocoa, a touch of vanilla and locally-harvested cranberries. Bedard loves it with anything chocolate and Laba says this stout has many dimensions.

"It's really wild to see how it can taste so very differently when paired with fudge, tiramisu, chocolate mousse, or Black Forest cake. They're all chocolate but the beer takes on very different properties with each of them," he says.

Back at Brooklands Farm, Hehir says the event was a great chance to support a local craft brewery. "Microbreweries are a big thing now and they're pioneering their craft. There's a lot of selection out there to choose from," he says.

Friesen believes drinking beer doesn't have to be limited to guzzling it down in front of the hockey game. "Beer can be just as sophisticated as wine. These breweries are putting love into their craft just as a winemaker would put love into their wine," he says.

Laba says more bars and restaurants are starting to take pride in what they're serving with their meals, from a beer standpoint.

As a self-described foodie he says one of the biggest challenges has been getting higher-end restaurants to realize that quality beer offerings should be sought-after like wine is.

"You'll spend months and months developing your wine list because when you serve your lamb, lobster, or steak you want to offer something that will pair well with it. But why on earth would you put a Coors Light on the table next to your \$35 steak?" he asks.

Laba has seen a shift in thinking and restaurants have started to move out the big, generic brands, and bring in taps of crafts.

"I think this has created a whole new dining experience and a future for craft beer in a high-end restaurant."

Now the \$35 steak has a chance at a well-paired beer.

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Chef Bedard creates a pickarel and chips meal that pairs well with Mad Tom IPA.

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