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Happy hour returns, pending governor's signature

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PETER FROST CRAIN'S DINING



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A law that **will bring back happy hour** and generally make Illinois more alcohol friendly passed both chambers of the General Assembly over the weekend, marking a major victory for the hospitality industry.

The Culinary and Hospitality Modernization Act, which will take effect this summer pending the signature of Gov. Bruce Rauner, effectively reverses legislation passed in 1989 that banned happy hour in the state because of concerns of drunken driving.

Supporters say the law will boost tax revenue for the state and municipalities by driving more alcohol sales, while creating a better-trained workforce more attuned to the safety of the drinking population.

Though "happy days" were still allowed in Illinois over the last 26 years, in which restaurants and bars could discount alcoholic beverages on a particular day of the week, they have been unable to take advantage of the after-work crowd with hours-long promotions that slice a couple of dollars off a pint a beer or a glass of wine.

Under the legislation, which passed the Illinois House 82-31 the Senate 52-1 over the weekend, restaurants and bars **would be allowed to offer discounted beer, wine and spirits** for up to 4 hours a day or 15 hours a week. Some limitations will remain in place, including volume discounts (no two-for-ones, for example), and no happy-hour deals after 10 p.m.

The bill also would clarify the law to explicitly allow restaurants to pair alcoholic beverages with meals, something that long has been done at Chicago's finer-dining establishments but not technically in accordance with the law. The bill's chief sponsor, Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, has said the provision came in response from restaurant owners who called her office to complain about being ticketed for the pairings. She declined to name the offenders.

Sam Toia, president of the Illinois Restaurant Association, said some chefs ran into problems over special events, like New Year's Eve, when restaurants offered a complimentary glass of champagne with the purchase of a fixed-price celebratory dinner. That technically ran afoul of the law. This bill Toia said, "defines in law what's allowed and what's not with pairings. Now the gray area is not so gray anymore.

"If you go into a restaurant like Grace, for example, and you get this wonderful multicourse meal with six or seven wine pairings, that's OK. There's no risk of penalties now" for the restaurant, he said.

Mandatory training for bartenders, servers

Bars and restaurants also may begin serving house-infused spirits, another no-no that often has been ignored around Chicago. That means imbibers can expect new cocktail offerings around the state that make use of peach-infused vodka or sour cherries soaked in rum.

Hotels also would benefit from the bill, which would streamline permitting and licensure for hoteliers that operate multiple venues under one roof.

In exchange for looser liquor regulations, the legislation would require mandatory statewide training for all who pour and serve alcoholic drinks, including servers, bartenders and the like. The program, called Beverage Alcohol Sellers and Servers Education and Training, is required in Indiana and Michigan and helps servers identify signs of intoxication, stop underage sales and get up to speed on state and local alcohol regulations.

The mandate requires servers in Cook County to complete the training by July 1 or 120 days after the alcohol server begins employment, whichever is later; and in other counties with population greater than 200,000 by July 1, 2016. Smaller counties will have additional time to enact the training protocol.

The mandate was passed last year for servers in Cook County, who must complete the training by July 1 or 120 days after they begin employment, whichever is later. The new legislation expands the mandate to the rest of the state on a rolling basis, with all counties required to implement the training by summer 2018.

The bill “is really a positive thing for the industry and it’s going to allow restaurants and bars to reinvent themselves and their marketing strategies for a customer base that’s very sophisticated and getting more so every day,” Feigenholtz said. “I think it’s going to be great for jobs, great for hospitality and help keep Chicago a culinary destination.”

Catherine Kelly, a Rauner spokeswoman, was noncommittal on whether the governor would sign the bill, saying only: “The governor will carefully consider any legislation that crosses his desk.”