

## For young bar owners, it's bottoms up

By Karen Dybis, November 22, 2011

It's one thing for bar owners to feel trepidation about their establishment's first Thanksgiving Eve bash. It's another when the business partners are younger than some of the scotch they will serve Wednesday night.

The quartet of Ryan Langan, 24, sister Shannon, 21, and their friends Shane Budlong and Chris "Bear" Thweatt, both 23, opened The Bottom of the Fifth in August in Farmington Hills. For most of them, this will be their first night before Thanksgiving in a bar — owner or not.

But these friends have experience as restaurant and bar employees and entrepreneurs. And they say they are ready to serve what they hope will be their largest crowd to date.

"In the end, I think our youth will be a benefit. Right now, I'll admit we haven't done this before. There's a learning curve," Langan said. "But we try to keep one another going. We don't pull each other down."

This perseverance will serve them well in what some industry experts call the Super Bowl of bar nights.

Shoppers have Black Friday, Internet junkies have Cyber Monday and 20-somethings have what some call "Bar Wednesday." Traditionally, Thanksgiving Eve is known for drawing sizable groups of young people out for the evening, eager to share tales of their life in or after college.

"It is one of the significant sales nights of the year," said Mike Lashbrook, president of the Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers Association, a Lansing trade association that represents 70 beer and wine distribution companies.

"A lot of the beer and wine companies are looking for those 21- to 25-year-old consumers because it is a key marketing group for them," Lashbrook said. "It involves a lot of preparation, and we're there behind the scenes helping them get ready."

Restaurant sales have seen a slow uptick in recent months after slumping during the recession, said Melinda Crump, a media relations representative for Sageworks Inc., a financial information firm in Raleigh, N.C., that focuses on privately held companies.

"Bar Wednesday's may give these establishments a needed boost as family and friends return to familiar places and get out of the kitchen and house after prepping for Thanksgiving Day," Crump said. "Our data suggests that people are going out to eat a little more often now or are spending a little more when they do go out relative to past years."

Many newer bars try to entice the Millennial crowd to their establishments with unique events, live entertainment and drink specials, such as complimentary samples of name-brand liquors whose manufacturer sponsors the night.

Then there are the parties. The Townsend Hotel and Corner Bar in Birmingham is hosting its second annual pre-Thanksgiving celebration, where the swank ballroom will become an "ultra lounge" with video walls, VIP booths and a huge dance floor.

In Detroit, MGM Grand's V Nightclub promises to bring "a little bit of Sin City to the Motor City" with its Biggest Bar Night of the Year bash. And PJ's Lager House has "Five Bands for Six Bucks," with indie-rock, rock-soul and post-punk bands of all stripes.

At The Bottom of the Fifth, Langan said they are going to stick to the basics: quick service, food specials and a booming jukebox. They have added a custom mobile bar, so both sides of the floor can keep traffic moving.

Langan and Budlong met when they started playing baseball together for the Novi Heat when they were 11 years old. Fast forward a decade, and Langan was working at the bar they now own together when it was known as Shots. That bar, built in the 1980s, was starting to lose steam, Langan said. He worked up a business plan for a sports bar that included renovating the interior and exterior as well as creating an expanded menu and a buzz among young professionals.

Langan soon brought in his sister, who ran her own massage company. Budlong was working in food service at the Hunt Club Café in the Fox Run retirement complex for six years. He also is a full-time student at the University of Michigan School of Business. He now operates the food side of the business with Thweat, a fellow Fox Run chef.

The partners went ahead with the renovations and installed a double island bar. This design allows customers to sit all the way around the bar, much like the friendly environment found in bars such as television's "Cheers."

They also added nine flat-screen televisions, a pool table, video golf and video poker.

The Bottom of the Fifth strives to be known as a good value with ample portions of burgers, grilled chicken and made-to-order pizzas, Langan said. Many of the dinners are under \$10, a strategy the partners felt was appropriate given the economic environment in which the bar is opening.

"In baseball, we learned to stick it out, to play every inning whether up or down," Langan said. "We know this won't be easy, but we are prepared to seize this opportunity and swing for the fences."

For the full story featuring Sageworks' analysis, please visit [The Detroit News - For young bar owners, it's bottoms up.](#)