

food

Smoking ban aside, Colorado restaurants find custom matches are still a great way to strike up a relationship

William Porter
The Denver Post

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Free matchbooks, a decades-old staple in restaurants and bars, would seem a likely candidate for extinction in this age of public-smoking bans.

But an odd thing has happened. Rather than going the way of the rotary-dial phone, the matchbooks, typically sporting a business' logo, have showed staying power.

Why? Chalk it up to a mix of nostalgia and a touch of club-kid irony — think porkpie hats and meatloaf as a menu star.

Toss in our crow-like eye for things bright, snazzy and free, and it translates into a gimme-bowl of sulfur-tipped pleasure at the host stand.

"Matchbooks are one of the few pieces of merchandise that customers are likely to carry around in their pockets and also one of the few collectibles," said John Bachman, director of

operations for the Boulder-based Big Red F Restaurant Group. "It's a way of getting our brand out there in front of people as often as we can, and it's an inexpensive way of doing it."

Big Red F's holdings include Lola, the Jax Fish House restaurants, The West End Tavern, Zolo Grill, Centro and The Bitter Bar. Not all the venues offer custom matches — "There's no rhyme or reason as to which ones do," Bachman said — but the plan is that eventually all be aboard.

Bachman said the matchbooks are ordered in batches of 25,000 and must be ordered every few months. Design is critical.

"A matchbook's content has to be captivating," he said. "The color, the logo, maybe something snarky or clever on the inside cover. Anything to make someone say, 'This stands out.' I think we're realizing their effectiveness."

That's music to the ears of Jack Wagner, who has run Wagner Match Corp. in Evergreen for 30 years.

The company sells all manner of custom hospitality products, including coasters, toothpicks, dinner mints and sugar packets. But matchbooks and matchboxes are the mainstay.



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Wagner said he sells millions of them nationally each year.

"A matchbook is a business card with a purpose," Wagner said. "It's functional."

Despite this, estimated national matchbook sales have dropped to about \$30 million from \$200 million in the 1970s. But since they're sold for pennies, the economic crunch has made them an effective ad medium for restaurants, allowing them to enjoy a mini-revival.

Wagner takes pains to create matchbooks that are aesthetically pleasing. They show an eye toward art, sometimes literally. He is especially proud of the matches his company created for Sweet Basil in Vail.

"There's a gorgeous painting behind the hostess stand," Wagner said. "We took that image and wrapped it around the matchbox, along with the restaurant's info.

"So what we have is a very appealing piece of advertising far cheaper than anything else out there and it's going directly to the customer. It's point-of-sale advertising."

At Steuben's restaurant and bar on East 17th Avenue, the vintage vibe extends beyond comfort food and midcentury decor. The matches, too, are a throwback, down to their '40s-era design. This at a restaurant that's 5 years old.

"They're great for us," said bar manager Randy Layman, who adds that Steuben's has ordered 50,000 matchbooks since January.

"Whenever someone is leaving and they see the match bowl, their reaction is really neat," Layman said. "Their eyes light up and they go, 'Hey, we never see this.'

"It's an absolutely effective way of getting the word out."

On a recent evening, Heather Lyons snapped up a Steuben's matchbook as she head out the door. "I don't smoke, but they come in handy," she said. "I like to keep a pack in my purse and glove compartment. It's also a keepsake. I look at it and have memories of a night out."

Linger, which opened in Lower Highland about 3 1/2 years after Colorado's smoking ban took effect, offers matchbooks that change every few weeks. They are popular among customers, said owner-chef Justin Cucci. The matchbooks are modeled after vintage '60s patterns found in the restaurant's decor. "We wanted to give guests something that was used and popular from the era," he said. "Matchbooks were a natural fit."

And Boulder's Pizzeria Locale offers matches in a tube container with a nifty pop top.

The hospitality biz isn't the only outlet for such matchbooks. When "Pulp Fiction" was released on video in the United Kingdom, stores gave away packs of "Pulp Fiction" matches stamped with a quote from the film: "You play with matches, you get burned."

The Avenue Grill has been a staple in Denver's Uptown neighborhood for two decades. The restaurant was long known for its matchbooks, which had a gleaming white cover with the



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restaurant's logo: a stylized martini glass, rendered in a few deft ink strokes, and a green olive.

"People really like them," said Joel Bryant, the Avenue's director of operations. "You go to someone's house and they have sets of them they've collected over the years."

But the restaurant hasn't reordered the matches for several weeks, and the bar no longer features tumblers filled with the matchbooks. That's being rethought.

"When the smoking ban started, the need plummeted," Bryant said. "But the matches were something we were known for and we probably should bring them back."

As Wagner, the match company honcho, points out, lighting a match is not necessarily the purview of nicotine fiends. Candles, fireplaces, charcoal grills — they all require a foray into the "close cover before striking" zone.

"It's not the smoker who needs the match," Wagner said. "They have Bic lighters. It's the rest of us."

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Photo illustration (above) by Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post. Model: Marnie Ward of Reveille 3, an Andrews Sisters tribute act (myspace.com/reveille3). Gloves provided by Mariel (1428 Larimer St., 303-623-1151).

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