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Area venues: Who's serving alcohol, and who's not?

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[Buy this photo](#) As the last major Central Illinois venue standing without a liquor license, the University of Illinois Assembly Hall in Champaign is toasting a new era: The 47-year-old arena's first-ever alcohol sales. (Pantagraph photo illustration by David Proeber)

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Cheers!

As the last major Central Illinois venue standing without a liquor license, the University of Illinois Assembly Hall in Champaign is toasting a new era.

The occasion: The 47-year-old arena's first-ever alcohol sales via this weekend's Cirque du Soleil performances.

This new era isn't intended as an affront to teetotalers or family audiences. Rather, say U of I officials, it marks the end of a disadvantage that has impaired the venue's ability to compete in a marketplace already in straits.

Even the Assembly Hall's kid brother several blocks to the northeast, the Krannert Center, has been serving alcohol "successfully for years."

"We've actually lost shows to the U.S. Cellular Coliseum in Bloomington and the Peoria Civic Center because they sell alcohol and we don't," says Kevin Ullestad, Assembly Hall director.

He continues: "There are a lot of acts that prefer playing in venues that do serve, especially if they are being sponsored by an alcoholic beverage. With fewer shows out there touring because of the economic conditions and volatility that exists in the industry itself, it puts us on a level playing field."

While Ullestad doesn't name names, it's no secret that country superstar Kenny Chesney's recent blockbusting Coliseum date was branded from hat to boot with the Corona beer imprimatur.

The Assembly Hall, Ullestad says, has actively pursued the new policy for several years. And it is being implanted under tightly guarded conditions. Only beer and wine will be served. And only entertainment events deemed "adult" will qualify.

For the time being, the only designated events are this weekend's Cirque du Soleil performances of "Alegria" (tonight through Sunday) and the April 24 performance of "Cabaret."

No sales will occur during "events that draw a large number of students" (that is, most rock concerts) or during any sporting event.

However, country and mainstream acts that skew toward a 30-and-older audience, a la Chesney, would be considered prime beer-and-wine candidates.

A two-drinks-per-person purchase limit will be imposed, with none sold within the seating area. However, drinks will be allowed in all seating/viewing areas. Only 12- and 16-ounce clear plastic cups or those with distributor logos will be permitted.

Stringent security measures and certified training in the service, sale and consumption of alcohol are part of the pilot program, which will conclude with Ullestad & Co. providing a written report to university administration to determine whether the sales will continue come the fall semester.

Where they are serving

By Dan Craft

How do the Assembly Hall's newly launched policies compare with those at other area arenas and performing arts venues?

Following is an overview of what's served, and under what circumstances:

BCPA

Currently, the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts' bar service is handled by outside vendors. Specifically, downtown Bloomington's country nightclub Six Strings, now in its second year running the city-owned venue's bar service.

According to Joel Aalberts, performing arts director for the Bloomington Cultural District, "we aren't staffed to do our own alcohol service, and it's not a path we've gone down yet."

The BCPA's bar service is open at all subscription series shows, exclusive of family events, says Aalberts.

For outside events that rent the auditorium, a la the Illinois Symphony Orchestra and Sound of Illinois Chorus, "it's up to the renter whether they want that service."

When it's open, the bar is available before curtain time and during intermission. Drinks must stay in the lobby.

For events outside the auditorium, such as The Underground series in the lower Ballroom or summer outdoor concert series, the bar will remain open during the performances.

Braden Auditorium

Alcohol sales at Illinois State University's long-running performing arts space is basically "a non-issue," says Bone Student Center executive director Jim Carlson.

While the BSC has a liquor license, "We haven't felt it (sale of alcohol) is an important part of our programming."

Hence, no drinks were available at the recent Robin Williams show or during the "Broadway at Braden" series that just wrapped its first season.

Occasions at which alcohol may be served are typically closed affairs, says Carlson, like a cash bar for private subscriber events occurring before shows in the nearby Old Main Room.

"In the public sphere, however, it's not a significant need," says Carlson.

Krannert Center

Braden Auditorium's U of I counterpart in Urbana, the Krannert Center, takes the opposite view, with alcohol readily available via the Stage 5 Bar in the lobby connecting the various theater auditoriums.

According to Bridget Lee-Calfus, Krannert's public information director, Stage 5 is open at all evening performances, but never on Sunday, before 4 p.m. any day or at family-oriented events.

"We're cognizant of the fact that there are students on campus, so we keep a tight rein on carding," Lee-Calfus says.

Unique to Krannert among area venues is the weekly wine tasting at Stage 5, every Thursday at 5 p.m., a popular event that attracts around 150 to 200 tasters weekly, with the added lure of live music and appetizers.

Peoria Civic Center

The food and libations at Peoria's biggest events venue are handled by a national franchise called Centerplate, which is kept busy with all the events passing through the three main spaces: arena, theater and Exhibition Hall.

Centerplate's General Manager Bill Woolsey, notes that each event is its own situation in terms of what is and what isn't served.

The alcohol policy is handled "on a show-by-show basis," says Woolsey. "A Christian-type concert probably won't want alcohol, but most rock shows will."

Drinks are served only in plastic or aluminum containers, and are allowed into the performance spaces, though, says Woolsey, that can vary in the more fine arts-oriented theater space.

Drinks are kept outside at symphony and ballet performances, but there are exceptions, such as last weekend's Willie Nelson show, which did allow drinks inside the theater.

And because Bradley University's basketball games are played off-campus in the arena, beer can be sold, despite a ban for events on campus.

As with most venues on this scale, staff training and security are a top priority, says Woolsey.

Redbird Arena

Though ISU's main sporting facility has a catering license that allows alcohol at special events, it remains barely used.

"We can't serve at any sporting event," notes Larry Lyons, senior associate director of intercollegiate athletics.

And because the venue's concert activity has dropped off in recent years, the subject rarely comes up in that regard either.

"We're not as focused on that as we used to be, so it doesn't seem to be issue for the handful that come through," Lyons says.

The two big concerts for this semester are next weekend's Christian rock tour Winter Jam and the April 9 Snoop Dog show. The former doesn't want alcohol to begin with, while the latter elicits a "no way" from Lyons (although a request from the tour for backstage alcohol in the locker room will be accommodated).

Along those lines, Redbird will provide drinks for other private and VIP events in specialty suites.

Sangamon Auditorium

The U of I at Springfield's counterpart to the Krannert Center in Urbana keeps the drink factor fairly low-keyed, says Stephen Chrans, assistant vice chancellor for student affairs. Apart from sporting events and family matinees, the bar is usually open for business in the lobby area before shows and during intermissions.

Since that usually amounts to only a half-hour tops, the full bar service doesn't have time to allow patrons to over-indulge, says Chrans.

U.S. Cellular Coliseum

Unless it's an IHSA game or a family event like a Disney on Ice show, drinks are usually on tap at Bloomington's biggest event space, hockey and indoor football games included.

Says Paul Grazar, food and beverage director, the drinks are spread out over the concessions stands (beer) and full-service bars.

The emphasis can skew a bit when alcohol-supported stars like Sammy Hagar (Cabo Wabo tequila) and Kenny Chesney (Corona beer) pass through, their sponsorship in tow.

Though other brands are available, it's the stars' brands that get the limelight (and in, Cabo Wabo's case, lime wedges).

Grazar says the Assembly Hall's contention that they've lost revenue and bookings through the former no-drinks policy is a fact of venue life.

"Alcohol sales are a big contributor to our total revenue."

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