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BURGERS & BOOZE

By Ariel Wesler

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Soft drinks have always been the classic compliment to a burger and fries, but more fast food franchises are experimenting with burgers and booze.

"Of all the things a restaurant can serve, alcohol has the highest percentage of margin," said Professor Michael Denning, who teaches marketing at Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business.

He says it's an easy way for restaurants to bring in more money in a tough economy.

"Getting a shot of tequila at a taco bell may be a long way off, but it does sound like it's headed that way," Denning said.

Burger King currently serves up beer at its Whopper Bars in Miami, Las Vegas, and Kansas City.

Two Sonic restaurants, known as Sonic Beach, in South Florida sell both beer and wine, but you can't take it to go--probably a smart choice.

Chipotle recently added premium margaritas to its menu. Even Starbucks is testing beer and wine through something called Starbucks Evening at locations in Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Seattle and Portland.

"Of all the places i can think of to go for happy hour, Starbucks wasn't top of my list," Denning said.

But the company hopes the move will attract more business at night. As you can probably imagine, the trend has its critics.

"It's just not something we want to see happen across the country," said Michael Scippa with Alcohol Justice, an industry watchdog group in Northern California. "It sends a damaging message to youth that alcohol is normal morning, noon, and night."

And the restaurants risk losing their family friendly image.

"I think it changes the atmosphere, and I think it may change the demographics of the people who are going to go to those restaurants," Denning said.

So, will the alcoholic trend continue to spread across the country like the smell of fresh French fries? We'll have to wait and see--because while taste may be king, so is cash.

"If they make enough money on it, it'll be there," Denning said.

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