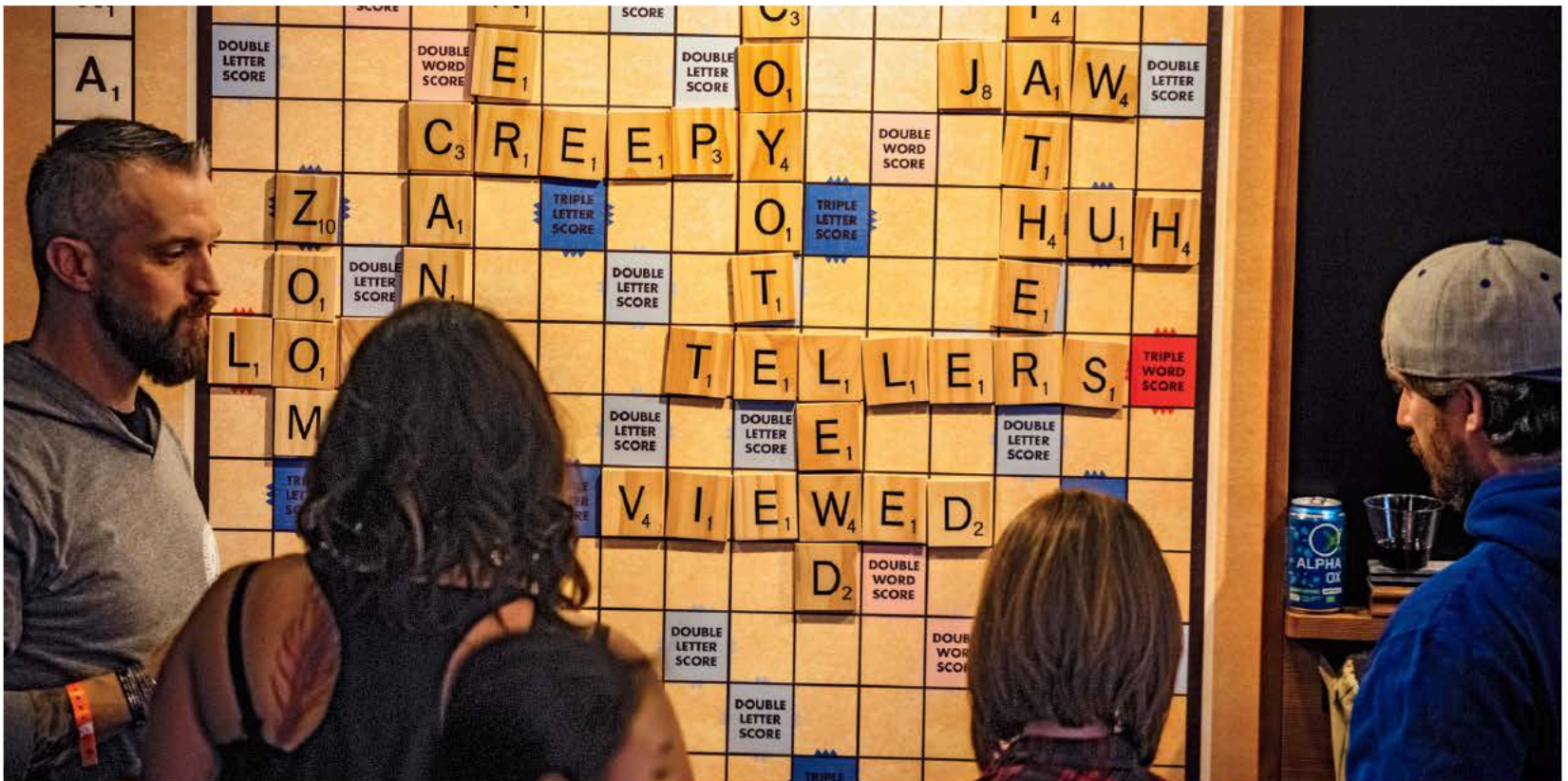


This restaurant chain wants to encourage human interaction among millennials

The growing restaurant chain has bowling lanes, shuffleboard, mini-golf, VR parlors—and great food, too.

BY BROOKE PORTER



When Robert Thompson opened the first Punch Bowl Social—an “eatertainment” concept that combines games and food—in his hometown of Denver, in 2012, he had one thing in mind: to encourage real, human interaction among millennials, inspired by the Victorian-era tradition of gathering around a bowl of punch. “This generation demands experiences, which also manifests itself in food and beverage,” he says. His company’s 15 U.S. outposts, from Atlanta to Portland, Oregon, include plenty of diversions: VR parlors, vintage arcade games, bowling alleys, and the food itself, thanks to menu staples created by James Beard Award-winning chef Hugh Acheson and now under the aegis of in-house chef Sheamus Feeley. Punch Bowl Social’s revenue grew by 31% last year, driven by food and beverage sales. As the company

expands—it added four locations in 2018 and will open eight more this year—Thompson is finding new ways to keep people engaged, entertained, and eating well. Here’s his formula:

SHARABLE FOOD, INSTAGRAMMABLE DRINKS

To appeal to private parties and larger groups, Punch Bowl has evolved its menu to include a larger selection of shareable dishes, such as a meat-and-cheese plate with duck confit and marinated feta, and a “sheetload of nachos” platter that’s topped with adobo-marinated squash. The company also added streetstyle tacos, inspired by a trip to Mexico City last summer. On the drinks menu, punches and booze-free craft cocktails join fresh juices, fizzes, floats, and specialty sodas.





PLENTY OF WAYS TO PLAY

Games: With bowling lanes, billiards, shuffleboard courts, and even in the new Arlington, Virginia, outpost a giant Scrabble board, Punch Bowl encourages analog play. A Nordic woodland-themed nine-hole mini-golf course debuted in Cleveland in November. This past year the company also rolled out private VR parlors (where friends can laugh at you while you play) in three new locations. Up next: dart boards with automatic scoring—which will speed up games and allow more people to play.

DESIGN WITH A WINK

Thompson created an in-house, seven-person design team at the end of 2017 to ensure that each location gets a unique and (yes) Instagram-friendly look. The year-old Chicago West Loop outpost includes a laundromat-themed bar and a mountain-lodge-style lounge while the Rancho Cucamonga location, outside of L.A., features eclectic, Art Deco-inspired interiors. An upcoming Punch Bowl in Dallas's Deep Ellum entertainment district will have a custom art installation featuring Shinola turntables.

FLEXIBLE FLOOR PLANS

The original Punch Bowls typically span 25,000 feet, but Thompson has tweaked the formula by replacing traditional bowling with duckpin lanes and placing a bigger emphasis on board games, among other things—so that newer outposts can be as small as 12,000 square feet. The condensed footprint allows Punch Bowl to move into smaller buildings in secondary and tertiary markets, such as Salt Lake City and Fort Worth, Texas, which are full of millennials looking for an IRL good time. **FC**

