

Hospitality folks perplexed over Olympics, liquor laws State unlikely to relax restrictions for Games crowd

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Everyone in the room cracked up at the doctor's comment.

Salt Lake physician and anti-alcohol activist George Van Komen -- deadly serious in his crusade for tougher laws relating to drunken driving and alcohol consumption -- had just told the Utah Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission what he knew to be true. "People I know," Van Komen stated, "say it's easy to get a drink in Utah."

The commission chambers, filled with restaurant owners and managers, wine brokers, liquor representatives and hospitality-industry folks, broke out laughing. Eyes rolled. Snide comments rippled through the audience gathered several months ago to watch a meeting of the board that governs the purchase and distribution of alcoholic beverages in Utah.

It is true that for most people who visit Utah, the bark of Utah's teetotaling image is much worse than the bite of laws themselves.

"There are perceptions and there is reality," said Rick Davis, president and chief executive officer of the Salt Lake Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"And in spite of reality, there is the perception among many people who have never visited Utah that this is a dry state -- that you can't get a drink here."

So people in the restaurant and hospitality industry are gearing up to find the best way to guide people toward food and drink service when the 2002 Winter Olympic Games come to town.

"This is absolutely on everyone's mind," said Lou Bertram, a former FBI media spokesman who now trains those who serve alcohol on Utah's liquor laws.

In many cases, directing those who want wine, beer and spirits to the appropriate place takes a lengthy discussion and extraordinary patience. But a person can get a drink in Utah, although he or she may run into some odd behavior along the way.

Consider the following scenarios:

Where am I? Negotiating Utah liquor laws requires a person to have a vexing knowledge of various business labels. There are restaurants, which have certain rules, "private clubs" with other rules and "taverns," which just sell beer and thus are a different ball game too.

Grocery stores stock "light" beer. But full-strength beer, wine and liquor is available at liquor stores. So Corona Light is available at Harmon's, but regular Corona, which has slightly higher alcohol content than the "light" and is one of the country's top-selling beers, is only available at the liquor store.

Chow down. Joe Traveler cannot go into a "restaurant" and have a beer and nothing else. He must order food too. In private clubs or taverns allowed to pour only "light" beer that meets the state-mandated 3.2 percent alcohol, this rule doesn't apply.

Which door? If Joe Traveler hears about a great seafood restaurant on Market Street in downtown Salt Lake City, his work isn't done.

Market Street Grill and Market Street Oyster Bar are side by side. One is a restaurant,

the other a private club. If he walks in the Grill's door, he is seated without incident. At the Oyster Bar, he will be asked whether he is a "member" and presented with the option to buy a two-week membership for \$10.

He'll need to be "sponsored," by a club member, who is often recruited with a shout and a request from anyone nearby who is willing to make eye contact.

"This is exceptionally restrictive," Bertram said. "It really isn't fair that some of the best restaurants in town are also private, so these fees amount to a sort of cover charge on top of everything else.

Hide 'n' seek . . . There are 36 liquor stores in Utah, 18 of which are in metropolitan Salt Lake County and Park City. Of the statewide stores, most are open 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Some in the metropolitan area are open 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Some in the hospitality industry say the early hours will be a frustration to some visitors.

Fingers do the walking. A conference for dentists has called Candace Sainsbury from Long Beach, Calif., to Salt Lake City. It is her wedding anniversary and she is in charge of picking up a bottle of wine during shopping and sightseeing while her husband is in conference sessions Friday.

"What an absolute pain," she says. She has no complaints about the selection of wines at the DABC Wine Store, once she finds it on 300 East downtown. In fact, she says, the selection is impressive.

But people like Sainsbury who are from out of state and don't know the area find liquor stores aren't easy to locate.

Remember the advertising laws. There are no advertisements in local newspapers. No billboards. The phone book offers no help.

Flip to "liquor store" in the yellow pages. Nothing. "Wine" elicits a list of wine brokers, but nothing else. State liquor stores are listed in the White Pages phone book, in the blue section of government listings under the state's "Alcoholic Beverage Control Department."

"I ended up going down to the hotel lobby, looking for someone who looked like a business person and asking them," she said. "It took a couple of tries, I think it was the fourth person who knew where one was."

No cold ones. Once someone like Sainsbury finds a liquor store, she'll find she can't buy a chilled bottle of Chardonnay or anything else normally served cold. The state won't refrigerate alcoholic products on the assumption that means quick consumption.

"With or without?" Utahns ordering a margarita in a restaurant may understand this question from a server who wants to know if customers want alcohol in their drinks. But it may leave visitors scratching their heads.

Servers aren't allowed to recommend alcoholic beverages unless asked by customers, and they can't assume a person wants something alcoholic.

No doubles. Law states each drink can have one ounce of liquor. So a double bourbon on the rocks becomes, by law, a bourbon with a separate "sidecar" shot containing another ounce.

By law, Joe Traveler -- not the bartender -- must pour the second ounce into his own main drink.

Utah liquor laws are rooted in the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, the state's dominant religion, which shuns alcohol.

Not surprisingly, the laws discourage consumption, and that philosophy dictates the way alcohol can be advertised as well as served.

If Joe Traveler wants a beer while on a layover at the Salt Lake City International Airport, he can get one with little problem. A special business license for the airport says the customer does not have to order food with his beer or glass of wine, and no membership is required.

But laws don't make it easy for traveler to find a drink. The "airport lounge" provision also says no liquor products can be advertised in view of the concourse where potential customers walk by, nor can alcohol be stored where it is visible to the public.

"It's a little bit of a guessing game for people," said Bertram.

"Because of advertising laws, they don't get many clues. We (Utahns) know Squatters is a beer joint. But if you're coming from Chicago or New York or London, England, you aren't going to know these things."

But those who supervise alcohol sales seem unwilling to make any adjustments.

Members of the Alcohol Beverage Control Commission -- headed by attorney Nicholas Hales -- have said they will not make major changes to the law to accommodate drinking visitors.

And Gov. Mike Leavitt told reporters last month the liquor laws are fine the way they are.

Mitt Romney, head of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee, also weighed in recently, saying he doesn't see a need to "change what we are" by overhauling state liquor laws for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

Those in the local hospitality industry are always concerned about how to hook up tourists with the food, drink, entertainment and scenery that best suits them, Davis said.

"Those programs will become especially important when we welcome hundreds of thousands of people for the Winter Games in 2002," he said.

Officials estimate 133,490 visitors a day between participants and spectators.

The people who visit will come back or tell their friends to visit, and the public relations that results from thousands of journalists stationed in Utah could be king-size kudos or a big-time bomb.

"We have to do the best job we can," Davis said.

That means the hospitality industry must be creative in complying with the rules and regulations while accommodating their customers.

Some restaurants may have ambassadors or extra staffers whose sole purpose is to help people navigate the curious maze of Utah liquor laws.

"I also think a lot of the success will depend on how innovative or clever the server is . . . without violating the spirit of the law," Bertram said.

But Bertram thinks people who believe the state may look the other way should think again.

When the National Sheriffs Association came to town in 1993, a couple of high-ranking officers were charged with soliciting prostitution, Bertram said.

"If (police) are not going to back off for the sheriffs, (liquor regulators) are not going to back off for the Olympics and give the wink."