

Bars and pubs across Hong Kong have quickly caught on to the popularity of the English Premier League and the growing number of organized supporters.

Some bars work with football fan clubs, they agree to give priority viewing for their team's games and discounts on drinks in return for the supporters making the venue their designated home bar for each match.

Guaranteed revenue from thirsty supporters and increased sponsorship from television and beverage companies has translated into more of these exclusivity deals. This year has seen new enterprises develop, specifically devoted to catering to even the most hardcore footie fan.

In the city's infamous Wan Chai district, Delaney's Irish Pub straddles the corner of Jaffe and Luard roads. It is known as the home of Tottenham Hotspurs followers, TottenhamHK - as bartender Regina knows only too well.

"It's starting again this Saturday? Oh! Here we go again," said the 42-year-old Filipina with a rueful smile, as preparations are made Thursday, two days before the new Premier League season commences.

Having served the "Spurs" fans for over five years, Regina has seen a noticeable increase in customer numbers in recent times.

"When I first began working here five years ago, I thought it was just a private members club," she said. "But now, particularly the last two years, I have seen the numbers increasing a lot, everyone wearing their Tottenham shirts, and we're starting to make more money, which we weren't before."

Delaney's itself is a classic "Irish pub" decorated in old-world style with a liberal use of dark wood and vintage-looking posters and photographs.

The first floor is exclusive on match days for Tottenham supporters, with several large flags hauled out emblazoned with "THFC Hong Kong" and "Spurs In Hong Kong". A signed shirt, photos of the supporters' football team and other paraphernalia are also present around the bar.

Despite the unsavory reputation that football fans can bring with them, Regina is not overly concerned and, if anything, wishes she could take part herself.

"Ok, yes it can be a bit tougher. They seem more aggressive if they're losing, lots of swearing," she admits. "But I know them; I know how to deal with them. And if they make a goal - wow! All the jumping around and singing, it's really fun and exciting."

She added that if only she knew the words to the songs sung, she would join in as well and it's clear that the relationship between the pub and the supporters is one that is mutually appreciated.

"The end of the last season was really nice, and they (the fans) got everyone to do a whip round and provide tips to the staff. That was the first time I'd ever seen that in Delaney's," she said.

Someone who may not always be as keen for his hosted team to win is Stew Bannister, manager of Champs

Bar on Wanchai Road, in the basement floor of the Charterhouse Causeway Bay Hotel.

Champs was known previously as an Arsenal F.C. supporters bar, then the home of China HK Blues, a Chelsea F.C. group, and now Anfield's 12th, a Liverpool fans association. The only problem is that football-mad Bannister is none of those: his true love is Tottenham Hotspur.

"It's not too bad, but if it was still a bar for Arsenal (Tottenham's great rivals), then I wouldn't be here!" Bannister asserts. "As it is, if it's Liverpool versus Spurs, I won't be here, I'll put on my Spurs shirt, shake hands with the Liverpool boys and go to the Spurs bar."

Unlike Delaney's, Champs is a genuine sports bar and set out accordingly: Three projectors, nine LCD screens and the capability to simultaneously provide Cantonese and English commentary to different areas of the bar allows them to cater to both sets of fans, local and expatriates.

This bar, home of the local "Reds" community, is covered wall-to-wall in football memorabilia and mementos, including contributions from Anfield's 12th and also Standard Chartered, which is this season's sponsor of Liverpool F.C. Even the exit door has been painted in the team's colors and decorated with a huge Liver bird, the symbol of Liverpool and its football team.

"Supporters clubs are a good thing, the Premier League is well followed here, and if you go to any office on a weekday - aside from talking about the wife or girlfriend giving you grief - the biggest topic is football," said Bannister.

The bar manager claims the fans bring in a guaranteed minimum revenue throughout the football season. Despite a poor campaign last season, Bannister said that the numbers of Liverpool supporters attending increased this year and had taken a greater interest in personalizing the bar with their own collectibles and

events.

Champs' match-day takings are at least HK\$5,000 per game, Bannister claims. Even for minor games he would expect around 50 members of Anfield's 12th, whereas upwards of 100 fans could be expected for grudge matches or prestigious European fixtures.

Prestige and glamour are attributes often associated with high-profile Premier League clashes, but very rarely applied to the low-key bars showing the games. However, this is not the case with the Manchester United Restaurant Bar recently opened on Lock Road in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon. After all, it's not every football pub that can boast an executive chef like Philip Chong, with a Michelin-starred restaurant on his C.V.

"It's a more cultured experience, and there's no swearing or drunken people here," says the Hong Kong outlet's 32-year-old Canadian-educated business development manager, who opened the restaurant-bar with his partner in May 2010 and asked that his name be undisclosed.

This up-market establishment is clearly targeting higher-income and more discerning football fans. Boasting a modern and hip vibe with atmospheric low lighting, designer furniture and a large range of imported British ales and gourmet dining that includes Iberian pork on the menu, it's a far cry from the traditional English footie pub.

In truth, the Manchester United restaurant would not look out of place amongst the trendy bars in SOHO or Lan Kwai Fong. However, at its core, it too is a shrine to football.

The walls of the low-ceilinged venue are covered with photos of team's stars and quotes from the club's legendary manager, Sir Alex Ferguson. And the restaurant is completely filled with more than a dozen screens, including a large projector in the rear and even LCDs in the men's bathroom.

"We are focusing on a total dining experience: have a drink, a dinner with high quality food,



Football fans find home in bars

As Premier League football kicks off,

supporter groups get ready to

mix it up at their home pubs,

writes Daniel Pordes.



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Poster outside Trafalgar Bar in Wan Chai promotes the weekend soccer match.



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Champs Bar in Wan Chai is home of the local "Reds" community.



PAUL ELLIS / AFP
Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina (2nd left) fumbles the ball into his own goal for Arsenal to score an equalising goal during their English Premier League football match on August 15, 2010.



GLYN KIRK / AFP

Chelsea's French midfielder Florent Malouda (up) celebrates scoring the opening goal with teammates during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and West Bromwich Albion on August 14, 2010.

One team, two styles of cheering

By Daniel Pordes
FOR CHINA DAILY

It's Saturday evening, just one hour before the first kick-off of the English Premier League season, and hardcore football fan, Kinson Leung is getting excited.

While the regular three-month off-season break - from mid-May to mid-August - has been mitigated somewhat by this year's World Cup, it still leaves Premier League fans suffering withdrawal.

It's not just the clash between potential top four rivals - Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City - that has him worked up, but a return to the community with whom he'll watch the game.

"I get to see many friends and fellow fans I haven't seen in a while. It's been several months since we were together," the 28-year-old Hong Kong native said. "I can't wait to feel the atmosphere and sing football songs

with them again - I have missed it a lot."

A supporter for over 15 years, Kinson watches every game at any and all hours, and recently made his first trip to London to make the pilgrimage to White Hart Lane stadium to watch his favourite team play.

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smile. "I am not afraid to speak English or make new friends." He has also embraced the Western football culture, singing and chanting along with the others. "It makes me involved in the team; we're like the 12th man. I feel like part of Tottenham," he said. James Yeung is a fellow Hong-konger and TottenhamHK member. A teetotaler who never considered attending bars before joining in with

the Spurs supporters, he is a now a regular at all the match day gatherings. "Culturally there are a lot of new things for me to learn, like when I watched at home, I used to sit still and be quiet but now supporting my team is a very different experience," he said. "I can now get my feelings out; the passion for Spurs is not just inside. I can shout and sing and express my



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Kinson Leung has been a Tottenham supporter for over 15 years.

love for the club with people who feel the same way. I enjoy it very much." James is more open-minded about those who choose to show their support differently.

"Most local Hong Kong people are quite conservative in expressing their support. They are not used to singing, but deep down they love the team too," he said. "If they didn't, then they wouldn't come out to watch the

games at all. Win or lose we share the same emotions."

"Football can bring different communities and nationalities together," James added. "In our supporters group we have members who are Chinese, English, Indians, Singaporeans, New Zealanders and more. All are genuine supporters and there is no cultural difference that we cannot overcome."

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STEW BANNISTER, CHAMPS BAR MANAGER



and with the Arsenal adherents now in other locations, the lure of the guaranteed revenue could prove to be too much for Porteous.

"For this Saturday's game, around 15-20 Manchester City fans will be coming by to watch," he admitted.

When Saturday came, Delaney's heaved with boisterous Tottenham devotees cheering on their team and

bemoaning the poor finishing and bad luck. As the halftime whistle blew, the fans descended the stairs, grumbling and chatting amongst themselves. Regina headed towards the main bar on the ground floor level.

She paused, turned around, and smiled broadly: "It's great to have everyone back."