

pub & bar

FOR THE MODERN ON-TRADE

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FOLLOWING THE SCIENCE

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JINGLE BELLS, CHRISTMAS SELLS

How consumers will use the pub this festive season

A WINTER WORLD CUP

Now is the time to plan for the unusual fixture list



CHEERS FOR FEARS

HALLOWEEN AND BONFIRE NIGHT OFFER BACK-TO-BACK OPPORTUNITIES FOR SAVVY OPERATORS THIS AUTUMN

FRIGHTS AND FIREWORKS

Trick or treat! Lauren Fitchett talks to the pubs and bars turning autumn into a bumper time for trade

Sandwiched between the beer garden afternoons of summer and festivities of December, it's easy to overlook the opportunities of autumn. But don't assume your punters want to hunker down at home as the evenings draw in – harvest time is ripe with potential and, when done right, can be an incredibly lucrative season.

FIFTH OF NOVEMBER FUN

At The Norfolk Arms, near Sheffield, landlord Mike Cullen says that's certainly the case.

Choose Bonfire Night or Halloween and do it well

Bonfire Night at the pub – nicknamed The Great Fire of Ringinglow – draws 500 people through the doors and is its biggest event of the year. It's become well-known to locals (they even help build the fire in the lead-up), but promotion still starts early, with the team pressing send on the first social posts in mid-September.

Those less confident on numbers might choose to charge for tickets to cover costs, but Cullen has decided against this. Instead, the family-friendly event is treated as a chance to boost trade during what can often be a slower time. "We have a marquee and a hog roast, chilli, jacket potatoes and bonfire toffee – nothing highfalutin, but comforting food that people want," he says.

An awareness of their surroundings (including alpacas living nearby) means the event doesn't include fireworks – a decision Cullen believes often falls in their favour. Grateful families with young children and pets who might have been frightened by the

displays are happy to come along. And while the event has become a local favourite, Cullen says pubs of all shapes and sizes can use Bonfire Night to their advantage.

"It's a good crowd-puller," he says. "We do have the space, but [pubs] can do something whether it's big or little – even if it's just a smaller bonfire, people appreciate that more than doing their own at home."

While warming classics and a log fire might be enough, you know your customers better than anyone and might be conscious that in tough times, when many have one eye on their bank balance and the other on costs down the line, you'll need to make a compelling case to entice them out.

For inspiration on how to approach a classic with a modern twist, look no further than The Hare and Hounds, near Wakefield. The venue, which is part of Star Pubs' estate, attracts 300 people to its Bonfire Night event – despite it having neither a bonfire nor fireworks. Punters are far from bored, though

– there are individual bookable fire pits, stilt walkers in reflective robot costumes and fire eaters on the bill.

Thirty pounds secures a table, while £5 gives visitors access to a standing area, with food and drink on top. Licensee Jackie Fairburn says traditional Bonfire Night fare is on the menu, including hot dogs, pies, chilli and jacket spuds.

“I go big on Bonfire Night rather than Halloween,” she explains. “You need to choose one or the other and do it well. We don’t have fireworks because of our village location, plus my four dogs hate them.

“It’s important for us to sell tickets to cover our costs, and a great way to boost food and drinks sales and profits. This year we’re adding space for another 50 so we can invest in an additional robot.”

SPOOKY SEASON

Let’s skip back a month, for a minute. There’s Halloween to celebrate first, and, whether you love it or loathe it, the pumpkins and ghoulish costumes popping up in shops suggest it’s already on people’s minds.

Traditionally celebrated more widely in the States, the spooky season is becoming increasingly popular at home. In fact, Tim Galligan, operations director at Star Pubs & Bars, says it’s the second biggest retail occasion of the year. “If you’re going to celebrate Halloween, the key is to go all out so that you make an impact,” he advises. “Hold an earlier party with traditional games and a disco for children, as well as a later one with a DJ or karaoke for adults.

“Make fancy dress obligatory for staff and customers and include a competition for the best costume. Don’t just opt for shop-bought decorations – add your own touches, whether it’s animatronics, coffins and skeletons or haunting sound effects.”

And as with any occasion, don’t limit your celebrations to the day itself – this year, 31 October falls on a Monday, giving you a chance to spread festivities over a few days. Why not introduce a Halloween-themed menu or cocktails in the run-up, hold your main event over the weekend and organise a spooky quiz on the day itself? Whatever you choose, don’t forget to start promoting your events as early as you can.

To supercharge your marketing, Galligan says Star has produced free Halloween point of sale kits with decorations including balloons, window vinyls, external signage and selfie frames.

At The Tally Ho, near Edinburgh, the team has been gearing up for Halloween for some time. The Star pub runs a ticketed afternoon family event, before an adults-only evening version (with mandatory fancy dress) kicks off. For a tenner (or a fiver for kids, with a £20

promotion offered to families of four), guests can tuck into a themed menu and cocktails, enjoy a children’s garden ghost tour led by an actor and a DJ and disco for adults. There’s a wolf and banshee animatronics and even a silent firework display to keep locals on side.

Promotion ahead of time is key, says manager Craig Clapperton, with spooky videos and a social media prize draw pushing



Tim Galligan, operations director at Star Pubs & Bars

ticket sales – the events are often sold out, with 200 people attending.

“We do multiple posts as people need reminding three to five times,” he explains. “We put on entertainment and are very strict about people dressing up otherwise it’s just another day. They have to wear face paint at a minimum.”

You don’t, however, need to plan a big event to tap into Halloween – and if your pub or bar is said to be haunted, then most of the work has been done for you. Promote tales of ghost sightings and hire storytellers to really do them justice. When combined with dishes or drinks that have a spooky twist, you’ve created a low-fuss way of marking the occasion. ➔





HEARTY CLASSICS



Pulled jackfruit with avocado salsa from St Pierre



St Pierre Groupe chilli hot dogs

The weather is always an inevitable challenge when it comes to food

If you don't have a ghostly reputation to rely on, consider decorating your pub to add something new. Hanging up skeletons, bats and cobwebs will do the trick, and targeting them towards specific areas (perhaps around the bar, or in dark, cosy nooks) will create the eerie atmosphere your customers will be craving.

PROST!

Why not take inspiration from the continent when it comes to planning your autumn celebrations? More and more pubs are looking to German Oktoberfests and channelling Bavarian beer culture behind the bar. While the larger overseas

events come to a close in early October, there's nothing to stop you celebrating the occasion throughout the month.

Don some lederhosen or a dirndl, promote beers which fit the bill, introduce new specials for customers to sample and put bratwurst on the menu to entice punters in – including some who will have scrapped annual trips to European Christmas markets – to try something different.

Without extra planning, autumn can quickly become a quieter period. But by embracing the season and making the most of occasions, there's plenty of opportunity to head into the festive period feeling positive. If budget, space or staff limitations make full-scale events a challenge this year, why not just lean into the cosy autumn atmosphere? Create an autumnal wine and cheese tasting, host a loaded hot dog night, try a warming mulled cider or wine recipe or simply focus your marketing around open fires and Sunday roasts. ^{©BB}

CONTACTS

ST PIERRE GROUPE
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At this time of year, your menus should reflect everything your customers love about autumn – wrapping up warm, getting cosy by the fire and feeling the crisp chill in the air. Choose warming, comfort foods that are family-friendly and can be enjoyed outside to tap into the sense of nostalgia that often accompanies the changing of the seasons.

Of course, any autumn event comes with an element of risk in the UK: the weather. A downpour or sudden plummet in temperatures could leave you with fewer guests than you'd expected – and catered for.

Products that offer an extended shelf-life will be a must, says Scott Oakes, commercial manager for the St Pierre Groupe, and also reduce the risk of wastage. He says ambient breads, buns, baguettes and bagels which can easily be frozen are ideal for pubs that need to manage stock during the colder seasons.

"Halloween and Bonfire Night are both key football drivers for pubs, whether hosting themed evenings or putting on a fireworks display," he adds. "But the weather is always an inevitable challenge when it comes to food – cater for too few and you could be left short, cater for too many and you could end up throwing stock in the bin."