

# Drinking in Pittsburgh & Allegheny County

## On the Pubnetwork™

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Posted: November 2008

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Here are some notes on how we drink in Allegheny County. Yes, we elected people to pass laws for this. Most of this comes from State government and administered by the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. The Pennsylvania State Police has an enforcement division and local and county police aid in the enforcement.

### Beer to Go

A tavern or “bottle shop” can sell you no more than two six-packs of beer (192 ounces) at any one time. A bottle shop is a tavern but the owner wants to sell you beer to go and is willing to let you mix and match what you want. You cannot open the beer in the bar if it was sold to go. You have to have all beer to go in a bag. You cannot unseal it or remove it from the bag.

Brewpubs and taverns can sell beer in growlers to go. Growlers are half-gallon glass jugs. You buy the jug but you can bring it back for refills. One brewpub interpreted the law to read that all containers had to be sealed so they applied shrink-wrap around the cap to show that it was “factory sealed”.

### Beer Distributors

You can only buy beer by the case at a distributor. You cannot mix and match beers to make your own case. Brewpubs can sell cases and six packs if they bottle and they tend to allow mixed cases. Ask the bartender or wait-staff about this.

### Beer Measures

There is no law in Pa. that says how beer can be sold. Basically one buys a glass or bottle of beer. Most places do not advertise a price with respect to a specific measure. Beer usually comes in 7 (pony bottles), 12, 16 and 20 ounce bottles or glasses. Some bars serve by the liter or parts thereof. After the introduction of the drink tax some places started using “special” glasses. These looked like the regular 16 ounce glass but they had a really thick bottom and the glass only held 14 ounces. Guess what the price of a beer cost in those glasses? But they are permitted. Beware.

### Brewpubs

Basically, a brewpub is a restaurant that has an in-place brewery. Naturally they want to sell their beer but they are allowed to sell other beers as well. They seldom do. They also serve a full range of wines and spirits to compliment their food. Brewpubs sell beer samples of about five or six glasses to an order. In total they make about a pint. The nice thing about this is one can try a lot of variety and then settle in to a favorite on subsequent visits.

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### Bring Your Own

Under state law, there is no prohibition stopping you from bringing your own beer into a bar or restaurant. The owner can say no. You can bring your own wine to restaurants that do not have a license but expect to pay a corkage fee. Can you do this with beer? Yes, but most wives fuss about this. Under the law the state only requires that you show proof that the sales tax was paid. I can't remember anyone ever checking this.

### Children in Bars

Although you cannot drink in Pennsylvania until you are 21, you can be in or at the bar if you are with an adult. Dads bring their sons to bars to watch sports, which I think is ok as it keeps dads under control. I knew of an incident where somebody called the police on friends of mine for having their infant at the bar. But this is legal.

### Drink Tax

Allegheny County imposed a 10% tax on all alcohol sold within the county. This tax applies only to the alcohol you buy, not food. Yes, this stirred up a hornet's nest. The state sales tax is 6% but there is an additional 1% sales tax in Allegheny County.

For more on this see [www.alleghenycounty.us/treasure/alcoholtax.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/treasure/alcoholtax.aspx)

### Free Beer

Anybody selling beer, wine or spirits must have a license from the state to do so. If you do not have a license you cannot sell beer but you can give it away for free. Some places offer free beer as an enticement to have you come back. Under the law they cannot ask you to buy food or service. There are no restrictions other than the limit they may offer. Yes, the state does keep an eye on places that do this.

### Home Brewing

One can brew beer in ones house for your own consumption. State and Federal laws permit this and you are free to give it away to all the new friends that you are sure to make. Just remember that you cannot sell it.

### Open Container Law

The City of Pittsburgh has a law prohibiting having any open container with any kind of alcohol exposed in public. If you have a bottle it needs to be in a bag. Even in a bag it needs to be sealed.

### Wines & Spirits

You can only buy wines and spirits for home use from a state controlled Wine shop, more commonly known as a State Store. Don't think about going there on a Sunday. Wineries are allowed to sell to the public. Yes, tavern owners must buy from the state as well, so don't think that they are trucking it in from the south of France. The selling of wine seems to everybody irritated. They can't get what they want when they want and the always think its too expensive. I say; get a grip, get a beer.

### Smoking Indoors

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The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania passed a Clean Indoor Air Act in 2008, which prohibits smoking in most bars and restaurants. Pretty much you cannot smoke indoors. Bars can apply for an exemption and allow smoking. Usually they do very little in the way of food sales and it cannot exceed 20% of their total. There are other criteria for this but I won't go into it just yet. Ask the bartender if you can smoke. For further information see [www.health.state.pa.us](http://www.health.state.pa.us). You can check this site to get the latest information on smoke friendly places in Pa. Restaurants can be granted permission if they have a bar and it must have a separate entrance and a wall between the bar and the dining room. No person under 18 is permitted in a bar or restaurant bar that has smoking. That includes workers or delivery people.

### Time Gentlemen

Bars and restaurants holding a liquor license may open only between the hours of 7:00 am until 2:00 am. Private clubs can stay open until 3:00 pm. After that you must leave no matter what you have on your table. Look for last call about 20 minutes before closing. No orders after last call. These places can apply to the state to stay open after hours but no alcohol can be served and it must be locked up or in another room. After hours clubs are illegal and I can't recommend going to one.

Bars and restaurants can be open everyday unless the local community has a restriction. They can be open on Sunday but only if they have a Sunday license, which cost more. To get a Sunday license a certain percentage of their sales must be in food. If they don't sell enough food the state will not allow them to open on Sunday. But they can permit smoking if they get permission. And you thought selling beer was easy!

### Tabs

It is common to run a tab while you are at a bar. During off times the bartender will run a tab without restrictions and give it to you when you cash out. When the place starts to hop you may be asked to present a credit card. Some places return the card while others hold the card until you leave. Since the smoking ban took affect many smokers leave their beer at the bar and step out for a few puffs. Some never comeback. This is why more and more bars may ask for cards first.

### Links

Pa LCB [www.lcb.state.pa.us](http://www.lcb.state.pa.us)

Bureau of Liquor Control Enforcement [www.psp.pa.state.pa.us/bice/site/default.asp](http://www.psp.pa.state.pa.us/bice/site/default.asp) posts the Pa beer list for every beer allowed to be sold in Pa.; see [www.lcb.state.pa.us](http://www.lcb.state.pa.us) For Licensees, Registered Brands.

Allegheny County Government [www.alleghenycounty.us/](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/)

Allegheny County Department of Health [www.achd.net/](http://www.achd.net/)

City of Pittsburgh Government [www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/](http://www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/)