February 2016

Hometown Hops

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2016/iss3/7
In the “Golden Age of Beer,” local breweries are taking over the spotlight in the ever-successful brewing industry. For centuries, beer has been one of the most widely loved alcoholic drinks in the world. Currently the number one consumed form of alcohol in the United States, the drink primarily consists of malt, hops, yeast and water and is available in a seemingly endless variety of styles and tastes. Beer enthusiasts around the globe are discovering their love of high-quality craft beer; excellent places to experience the drink for yourself are two local breweries — Torrent and Olde Main — right here in Ames, Iowa.

The owners of these breweries have two main characteristics in common — passion for their craft and the desire to share it with others. Scott Griffen, owner of Olde Main Brewing Company, founded Olde Main 12 years ago as the first brewery in Ames.

“I love beer. We had been talking about this for a while, so I sent the first brewer here to brew school and we started Olde Main,” says Griffen. Andy McCormick, founder and owner of Torrent Brewing Company, started his brewery for a similar reason.

“I started as a home brewer a little over nine years ago using a cheap home brew system,” says McCormick. “Two years ago I had a crazy idea, which evolved into Torrent. I saw a niche in Ames and decided to fill it.”

The breweries have become highly successful businesses in the community, each offering unique products and experiences to customers.

The allure of craft beer and local breweries in America emerged in the late 1970s. According to the Brewers Association, the beer industry at the time was becoming smaller and more monotonous — so home-brewing started to take over. The craft really began to take off in the mid 1990s. As people realized their love of smaller batch craft beer, local breweries began to emerge.

Why should students venture away from their typical bars and visit these breweries? To experience the unique atmosphere and the craftsmanship of the beer. Blaring music and packed dance floors — well-known elements of college bars — create a constant high-energy environment. Breweries, on the other hand, typically offer a more laid back, quiet ambience that is perfect for enjoying a beer and conversation with family and friends.

At Torrent, the tap room is where most of the action occurs. A large bar grabs the attention of guests as they walk through the door and displays the ten drink options offered on tap that day. Lights and music complement the exposed pipe ceiling and wooden tables, creating the perfect environment for conversation or a game of pool with friends. Further exploration of the brewery leads to a more secluded room that can be rented out...
for parties or gatherings. This rustic room features 12 cedar ridge bourbon barrels, reclaimed pallet walls and a large table made from reclaimed wood of an old barn.

Olde Main is set up a bit differently. The brewery is combined with a pub and a restaurant, offering two different environments for customers. The restaurant offers more of a classy environment, while the pub is more of a relaxed, fun atmosphere.

“I want anybody to feel comfortable walking in here,” says Griffen.

Both breweries also offer viewing areas where customers can see the creation process of the beer they are drinking. What most people don’t realize is the science and hard work that goes into brewing beer. Before the mug even touches your lips, the beverage must go through a scientific process of malting and fermenting that induces various biochemical reactions. It is not easy work for brewers.

“Most of the work at a brewery is cleaning. If you don’t have very clean equipment, you will skunk your beer,” warns Griffen. McCormick also pointed out the hard work that goes into cleaning, stating that cleaning is about 80 percent of the brewing procedure.

The brewing process is similar for all beer, but it changes slightly depending on the type of beer being made and preferences of the brewers. Beer can be classified into two main types: ales and lagers. Griffen gives an overview of the main differences. According to his processes, lagers are fermented at about 50 degrees for around 6 weeks and have a more blended taste composition. Ales, on the other hand, are only fermented for about a week, at around 72 degrees, and are typically more flavorful. Ingredients can be added and the process can be changed slightly to make the brew exactly how the brewer wants it.

Local breweries typically offer a small variety of high quality beer and have the advantage of following a more flexible brewing schedule — allowing them to offer innovative brews to set themselves apart from larger brands.

“There’s no big ownership in this business to tell us what to do. [Torrent] is a small, classic family business, so we can basically do what we want,” explained McCormick. “Honestly, I don’t know what we’re brewing next week. We don’t have a schedule of brews to make. If someone came in tonight and said they wanted a brew with roasted, mocha, espresso, crazy coffee beans — if it sounds good — we’ll go get the ingredients and make it.”

When asked about his vision for the brewery, McCormick responds, “We’re not a huge production brewery. If we can accomplish what we want here, that’s where it’s gonna end. There’s a level of contentedness that I’m looking to achieve. I don’t need pallets of cash, the goal is to obviously be financially sound, but be happy and have a rich, fulfilling career here.

“I want anybody to feel comfortable walking in here.”

McCormick said his main goal for Torrent is to make the community proud and let them participate in various aspects of the brewery. He often takes suggestions from customers for brewing inspiration, but took the community involvement a step further last year by giving individuals the chance to participate in growing hops for the brewery. McCormick gave a group of individuals hops root cuttings to grow on their own. He then used the hops they grew to brew an India Pale Ale appropriately named “Community Hopped.” Not only did the growers get to drink beer made from their own hops, they also received a discount on the brew. This year the brewery will be participating in this again, posting announcements on their Facebook page for all who are interested.

Olde Main stands out by offering unique seasonal brews to add variety along with their year-round brews. One of these seasonal brews is their highly popular Reindeer Fuel. This chocolate porter is brewed with chocolate malt and infused with Bavarian chocolate using a secret infusion process that Griffen refused to let slip. “It’s hard to infuse the brew with the chocolate, but we figured out a way,” he explains slyly.

Home and local brewing is an art that is steadily gaining popularity. Advice from McCormick to individuals interested in exploring the art of brewing: “Don’t be afraid to experiment, don’t be easily discouraged, and have fun. It’s about the experience.”

Torrent Brewery displays their various craft beers on a chalkboard located behind the bar

Stairs leading down to the brewery bring the Olde Main feel behind the scenes