



Home Sweet Beer

By Kevin Fritz

These local brewmasters have many reasons for creating their own beer, the most important of which is plain and simple: taste.

What a moment it must have been when, days after mixing together some malt barley and water over a fire, cooling it and adding some yeast, some man or woman stumbled on the first ever batch of beer. Nearly 8,000 years later, it's still a special day when that new handmade batch of fresh beer is ready to be enjoyed.

Although it is certainly more work to brew your own than to twist open a cold one, Central Florida brewers say the ends far outweigh the means. The truth is, any of us with a little space, some time and a few bucks can become part of one of the fastest growing hobbies in the world.

The Brewmaster's Wishes

"You can do it fairly inexpensively, or you can spend thousands of dollars," says

Mike Urban, who has been brewing from his home in Winter Springs for six years. "You can make excellent beer with just a pot on a stove." Indeed, brewing beer can be as complex or as simple as the brewmaster wishes.

Urban started brewing beer in Greensboro, N.C., before it became vogue, but admits the venture failed. Blame it on the well water or his lack of experience—either way, he had limited success. When he moved to Florida, however, he met **Van Rommel**, and the results have been superb.

The partnership has claimed several awards, brewing everything from lagers and porters to pale ales and stouts. "Van and I just have the right synergy," he says. They like to brew every month, but sometimes, he says, "jobs get in the way of their hobby," noting they make about 10 gallons of beer per session.

Instead of bottling his beer, Urban, an electrical engineer by day, uses five-gallon stainless steel containers, which are perfect for adding the carbon dioxide necessary for carbonation. It also reduces bottle waste, and it's pretty handy to take on the road, such as when attending a Central Florida Home Brewers (CFHB) meeting, which is the largest home brewing organization in the area.

The Home Brewers Club

Mike Eger from Windermere is the membership team leader for CFHB, a 20-year-old organization of approximately 150 men and women with a passion for making and sharing beer. Members come from as far as Melbourne and Sorrento to attend the Sunday afternoon meetings at Rossi's, an Italian restaurant in south Orlando.

Eger says approximately 40 to 50 members attend, each bringing samples of their latest concoctions. The club is best known as the creator of the annual Sunshine Challenge, which has become a renowned beer competition that draws brewers worldwide. Nevertheless, neophytes and curiosity seekers are more than welcome at club meetings.

At home, Eger has been brewing for about eight years, specializing in ales, pale ales, stouts and porters. He works at an environmental testing lab and uses his chemistry background at nights and on weekends

to do his own testing to brew 10 gallons of beer out of his garage each month.

He says start-up costs are usually recouped pretty quickly because the equipment is used again and again. The ingredients themselves are not expensive although the recent hop shortage caused prices to rise from \$3 to \$26 a pound. But he admits, "I'm not doing this to save money on beer. I do it to make what I want to make and to [make it] taste the way I want it to taste."

The Growlers

Susanne Berne of Delaney Park likes the fact that she does save money by making her own beer. "If you like drinking good beer, it costs half as much as buying it in a store," she explains. And although she just started making beer about six months ago, she talks like an expert brewmaster. Each month, she converts her "uniquely designed" kitchen into a home brewery, pumping out about five gallons. She most recently brewed an Oktoberfest style beer for the season.

Berne is part of a small local homebrewer's organization called Growlers Brewing Club that meets monthly at a different member's home. The club is named for the ceremonial growler—a glass jug that holds a half gallon of beer—that the host must fill each month with a homebrew. The 10 to 12 members share recipes, talk about new discoveries and, of course, sample beer. "We even start it with a beer prayer," Berne adds.

Berne agrees with Eger on how easy it can be to get started. For her, it's just two large pots, a big sink, a nice pantry for ales and a retrofitted wine cooler for lagers. She explains that, to make lager beer, which commercially is the most popular type, it must undergo two fermentation processes under temperatures as low as 40 degrees. She says one wonderful aspect about brewing pale ale is that it can be ready to drink in about two weeks while lagers can take up to six.

Steve Wall, an attorney from Winter Park, has been brewing for 13 years, starting in college at the University of Wisconsin. "It's not that hard," he says. He brews



Windermere's Mike Eger shares his passion for beer with other members of the Central Florida Home Brewers.

Photo by Kevin Fritz

in his backyard, noting he just needs a heat source, a hose and a cooler, and he's ready to go.

Wall is an experimenter, often making beers with specialty ingredients, such as fruit, honey and rye, that are not usually found in commercial varieties. He calls himself an "all-grain" brewer and has tried everything from adding orange blossoms off his tree to throwing in six pounds of blackberries. "Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't," he admits.

Wall has also recently brewed an Oktoberfest for the fall. "It's a style I really enjoy," he says.

Beyond the thrill of creating your own recipes, saving money and drinking good beer, there are also some health benefits to home brewing, according to Berne. She says the yeast sediment found at the bottom of the bottle in a homebrew is loaded with vitamin B, which reduces the risk of pancreatic cancer and fights depression. And it prevents hangovers. How cool is that? ■



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