



A Sign of Good Taste

Microbreweries offer beer drinkers a quality quaff

Many consider the Northwest inferior to its eastern counterparts in culture and diversity. But while Portland may lack the size and tradition of many East Coast cities, it redeems itself with the quality of beer it produces.

Portland boasts the home of three respected microbreweries, bringing a diverse selection of beers to the area. From the traditional English-, Scottish- and Irish-brewed ales and stouts brewed at the Columbia River Brewing Co. and Portland Brewing Co. to the top-fermented, German-style alts made at the Widmir

Brewing Co., the city revels in the ancient practice.

The West Coast, with its pure water, its internationally known Cascade hops and quality malting barley, provides the raw ingredients for the newly emerging sophisticated beer-drinking market and for microbreweries, which are defined as breweries that produce less than 10,000 barrels of beer annually.

The Northwest reflects, in part, a European attitude of high reverence toward quality, says Kurt Widmir, the head brewmaster for the Widmir Brewing Co. The number of high-quality coffee shops, bakeries, wine shops and restaurants have increased in the last 10 years. Likewise, the consumption of quality beer also has risen, he says.

"Oregon and the Northwest has been a very sophisticated market, and sales have always been very high in draft beer," he says. Portland's consumption of draft beer is among the nation's highest at 20 to 25 percent, 10 times the consumption percentage of "the California bottle babies" who consume a mere 2 percent of their beer on draft, he says.

The tough drunk-driving laws are forcing people to be more responsible drinkers, Widmir says. "Now if people are going to have only two or three beers, they are going to be really good beers," he says.

Brewer Karl Ockert of the Columbia River Brewing Co. agrees there has been a revival in the small, traditional brewing houses and pubs, noting most towns used to have their own brewery. "We are reviving something that is prevalent all over the world," he says.

Beer is big money in the United States. In 1985 alone, Americans drank 5.5 billion gallons of what Seattle Post-Intelligencer beer columnist Vince Cottone calls "Industrial Brew," mass-produced, mass-marketed beer.

"We really don't compete with the national advertisers. I'm sure we get some Bud drinkers to the ranks," he says.

Instead, competition comes from the Guinness and Becks drinkers who enjoy quality, Ockert says. "The American market is like Red China to us — it is just endless."

The three Portland microbreweries combined produce three-quarters of 1 percent of the beer produced in Portland.

Ockert and Widmir bring their own style and beliefs to the profession. Both are soft spoken, articulate and patient; each reflect the pride of the beer's national origin.

Ockert, with a formal degree from the University of California at Davis in fermentation sciences, brings modern techniques to traditional brewing. In addition, Ockert toured English breweries to gather firsthand information about the craft.

With his agricultural boots, jeans and plaid shirt, Ockert speaks highly of the brewery. Located in the former Portland Cordage Building built in 1886, the Columbia River Brewery operates independently of the Ponzi Vineyards and owner Dick Ponzi, allowing Ockert the luxury of financial stability.

The brewhouse and adjacent pub, complete with exposed pipe, brick and brass decor and dart board, operate with a staff of 11, an increase from last year's staff of three.

The largest of the three breweries, Columbia River produces 560 kegs a month, which is about 8,500 gallons — an amount less than one day's beer production at a major brewery. Producing near maximum output capacity, there is always a temptation to automate and increase output, he says, but it is the small size of the brewery that gives it a personal touch.

Microbreweries' saving grace is versatility, Ockert says. "We only have to sell 10 kegs to make some money. This gives us variety never seen before in or out of the U.S."

The company came out with its first product, Bridgeport Ale, in November 1984.

Widmir on the other hand took a hobby

of five years and made it into his profession. A 1974 University graduate with a degree in psychology, Widmir traveled to Dusseldorf, West Germany, to learn about alts, the German equivalent to the British ale.

He returned with the knowledge of a skilled German brewmaster, and more importantly, the yeast of Zum Eurige homebrew-house to open a family brewery in April of 1985. He says he has learned more in six months of operation than a lifetime of studying and a half-completed master's degree in the College of Business Administration.

Sporting a leather apron, gold-rimmed octagon glasses and gold watch, Widmir talks about the operation as a father talks about his son or daughter, a glass of Weizen wheat beer in hand.

"When your entire life savings is invested, you don't just get out of bed in the morning — you spring out of bed," Widmir says. The typical day requires about 12 hours work. Still Widmir says he is satisfied, having reached near maximum capacity for the brewery.

Kurt and his brother brother Rob, an Oregon State University alumnus, with the assistance of their father Ray, have been churning out beer daily for better than two years. Widmir Brewery now has four full-time employees with part-time assistance from Ray.

The Portland Brewing Co., the most recently formed Portland microbrewery, began production in February of 1986. Like Columbia River, the brewhouse is visible from the pub, which sports live jazz and blues plus local-brewed Portland Ale and Grant's Ale.

The process of making beer is relatively simple and requires three ingredients: malted barley, hops and water. The brewer steeps crushed barley in hot water, producing a liquor base called wort.

The wort then is transferred into brew kettles and boiled, while brewers add hops. The boiling process sterilizes the wort before being cooled and screened. They



then add yeast and transfer the beer to fermentation tanks before the beer is capped and placed in storage tanks.

The storage time for the beers vary, from as little as six days for some ales to the more traditional 12 to 26 days for the alts and ales. Because it is not pasteurized, the beer literally is alive as the yeast remains dormant.

Temperature also is a large consideration. The light and pale ales should be served at 45-50 degrees with the more full-bodied ales at 55-60 degrees. The German alts should be served at a temperature between 48 and 52 degrees.

There is no typical consumer for microbrewed beer, Ockert says, noting most consumers range from retired military servicemen who miss the flavor of good foreign beers to the upwardly mobile and just those looking for something new and local.

Widmir Brewery's biggest obstacle is public awareness, both in terms of Widmir as a product and specialty beers, Rob says. The company distributes about 60 percent of its beer and hopes to expand its Washington, Oregon and Idaho market into Montana and Colorado by the end of the year.



Story by
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Photos by
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The Portland Cordage Building houses the Columbia River Brewing Co., makers of BridgePort Ale. The building was constructed in 1886 (top left). The BridgePort Brew Pub showcases the brewery and offers its product on tap or to go (above). A pitcher of Widmir Weizen, a fine German-style altier made at the Widmir Brewing Co., awaits a thirsty throat (top right). Head brewmaster Karl Widmir stands next to a fermentation tank at his brewery.

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BOOK VIEWS Literature Review

Strega
by Andrew Vachss
Alfred Knopf, New York 1987
Reviewed by James L. Boren

Detective fiction fans who missed Andrew Vachss's first novel (*Flood*) have a double treat in store with the appearance of *Strega*. Vachss is the most recent writer to send a detective down those mean streets first described by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and the formula elements are all here in their latest forms: a one-name detective (Burke) with a knack for meeting dangerous, exotic women; a mute Mongolian professional killer named Max; a criminal entrepreneur running a Chinese restaurant as a front (Mama Wong); Michelle, a transvestite prostitute saving money for the

operation which will make "her" a transsexual prostitute; a street-wise con who speaks in doggerel verse (the Prophet); a junkyard-dwelling, Nazi-hating electronics wizard (the Mole); and Burke's lap

dog, a lethal, 140 pound Neapolitan mastiff misnamed Pansy. If this is not enough, there's the setting—a New York City described in terms so sleazy you'll want to wash your hands after reading. The villains in both novels are the child molesters and child pornographers who have slithered into American consciousness in recent years, and Burke is on a crusade. If graphic, squalid, sexual descriptions offend you, you may not like these novels, but Vachss is not one to paint a pastel portrait of child pornography. In *Strega*, Vachss's fiction captures the repulsive reality of a society devouring its children.

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