

WHO'S YOUR (BEER'S) DADDY?

Breweries show the birthing process. BY JEF STOUT

Oregon is a good place to drink beer. It's got to be true, because Widmer Brewing co-founder Rob Widmer says so. "It's a quality of life issue," he said, so life in Oregon is good. On top of the sky-rocketing fame of the Willamette Valley's wineries, and the iconic status of the Northwest's coffee culture, there's the beer. "If you like beer, then this is a great time to live in the Pacific Northwest," Rob said.

As much as you enjoy that ale you had last night, or plan to savor the lager chilling in your refrigerator this afternoon, it's just a product. Sure, you might know how your beer got in the bottle. You know that malted grain was boiled with hops, then the strained liquid cooled to just the right temperature before a dash of yeast turned the bitter juice into a foamy, malty beverage with just the right amount of alcohol. But you don't know who chose the hops, or who nurtured the process. The beer is there, you love it, but you don't know who its father is. If you truly love that beer, you'll search far and wide to establish its paternity.

The birth of beer is what is witnessed at a craft brewery. They're easy enough to visit. Two weeks ago, I toured four breweries in an afternoon. If I'd had the morning and evening, I could have compared a dozen breweries without much strain. The Oregon Brewers Guild website (www.oregonbeer.org) lists 53 brewpubs in Oregon. A dozen are in Portland proper, two are in Eugene (a third is opening soon), and the rest are spread throughout the state.

Though the basics of beer-making are the same regardless of where you go to watch it done, you get something different at each spot. A 1,500-barrel capacity brewpub like Lucky Labrador could fit inside a fermentation tank at Oregon's largest craft brewer, Widmer. The difference in scale is tremendous (one tank at Widmer holds the entirety of Lucky Lab's yearly output), but in essence, it's all the same. "Kurt and I started as homebrewers. When we built the first brewery, we built a large version of what we were doing at home," said Rob Widmer.

The people you meet at the brewpubs are the fathers of your beer. Besides giving you a micro course in brewing mechanics, you might get a good story out of the brewers. Head brewer at Laurelwood Brewing Co., Chad Kennedy, told about how he brewed his first beverage in Eugene while working at a botanical supply company. After some apple harvesting out back, he and his friends crafted a cider. From there, a change in career plans (Kennedy was a journalism major at UO) led to becoming a hot commodity in the craft beer industry. Since 2002, Laurelwood has collected four gold, five silver, and three bronze medals at the truly international World Beer Cup.

The brewers are passionate about their craft. Rob Widmer claims to enjoy brewing partially because he's a gear head, claiming that "the toys make it better," and everyone has an opinion about the ubiquitous India pale ale. ("It's something everybody does," said Lucky Labrador brewer Ben Flerchinger, "We're trying to expand the palate.") When asked whether their brewery dabbles in "gim-mick beer" (a category that usually means beer with ingredients beyond the traditional water, malt and hops), Flerchinger told about how they once got so fed up with requests for a fruit beer that they set out to make a vile concoction using salmonberries.

Aside from stories and faces, there's something else about a brewery tour that is worthwhile in its own right — the sampling of new brews. Though you can taste the bottled or tapped offerings at your home or favorite bar, many beers can only be found at the place of birth. Lucky Labrador had just finished the fermentation of their first Pilsner, and though it wasn't conditioned, I was able to have a glass of the unfinished elixir. Likewise, while you can find just four Widmer bottles on your store shelf (seven, if you include their three seasonals), their brewpub has 15 different Widmer taps, double the choice you'd have elsewhere. The Laurelwood was even kind enough to offer a sneak peak at their Belgian tripel, an ale brewed specifically for that weekend's International Brewfest.

If a beer is a child, then a brewery tour is a visit to the hospital nursery. You stand in awe at the incubators as the nurses tend to measurements and hope for the best. No where else can you be there when the first cry of a newborn is dispensed into a pint glass. Go, see, and share the brewers' pleasure.



STAFF FAVORITES

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Jef "Ten Pin" Stout
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Rob "Don't Call Me Nice" Weiss
MIRROR POND PALE ALE



Jen "Everything in Excess"
Donohue
MIRROR POND PALE ALE



Lance "Sleuth" Sparks
LAURELWOOD ETTINGER AMBER



Todd "Click Clack" Cooper
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