

MIGHTY SMOOTH

NEW LOCAL BREWERY TINY, FOCUSED ON SUSTAINABILITY by Nicole Fancher



There's a new kid in town among local microbrews. That's right, my fellow Oregonians: more beer! Because if there's one thing Oregon is known for — besides excessive rain, outdoor recreation, ravaging clear-cuts and a whole lotta ganja — it's our eclectic brew selection. The Portland metro area alone boasts more than 40 breweries, and the Willamette Valley has several fine breweries as well, including Steelhead, Ninkasi, High Street and Eugene City Brewery in Eugene. But what's so special about the newbie?

Maybe it's the modest operations. In northwest Eugene, adjacent to the railroad tracks off Bethel Road and nestled between two warehouse complexes, sits a small, pale yellow facility that resembles a long-term storage unit. This is Willamette Brewery, the tiniest brewery in Eugene — and perhaps in Oregon. It began operations in October 2006. But co-founders and brothers Jeff and Chris Althouse are proving that size doesn't matter; for them, making great beer means staying true to their values of quality and sustainability.

Born in Eugene, raised in Cottage Grove, and resident of everywhere else in the Valley, Jeff Althouse says he and his brother knew they wanted the brewery to represent their home. "The Willamette Valley is a beautiful place. We love it here," Althouse says. "The company is intended to celebrate that."

On a Sunday afternoon, my photographer buddy Zach and I wander into the brewhouse to meet up with the Althouse boys and check out the day's brewing: Today it's the medium-bodied amber ale. Inside, hoses twist along the damp, concrete floor and the roar of a motor fills the small space. Jeff, Chris and their friend Sam Terrall mill around a cauldron-like "mash tun," where one of the first steps in the brew process takes place. Grains are "mashed" at hot temperatures, which triggers enzymatic breakdowns of the carbohydrates into sugars. Right now, Sam peers over the mash tun, directing a "lautering arm" that swirls over and rinses the mash, leaving behind a sugary liquid "wort." The three men

plan on brewing four and a half barrels today — about 140 gallons of beer.

The description on the Willamette Brewery website reads "brewers of sustainable ales in very small batches," but Jeff Althouse says, "Sustainability can mean a lot of different things." For Jeff, it means buying ingredients like organic malted barley from family-owned distributors but also using products made by local artisans. For example, Willamette's tap handles — made from Oregon black oak — were designed and handcrafted by Pacific Engraving, a husband and wife woodworking company in Eugene. The handles' unique design has a hollowed out top section for the small informational cards Jeff created to describe each beer's characteristics and provide a company bio. The Althouses demonstrate their dedication

to sustainability in other ways: They use 100 percent windpower from EWEB and produce unfiltered beer that requires less processing and produces less waste.

Jeff, the main force behind Willamette Brewery, is optimistic about his new role as professional brewer. A former Springfield math teacher, he found that while he loved public education, he wanted a new challenge. "By teaching I realized how much I really love learning." He felt drawn towards the organizational creativity of running a business, and he wanted to pursue his passion for brewing beer — a craft he's been perfecting for the past eight years.

Jeff and his buddies began homebrewing as UO students. Eventually, he set up a home brewery in his kitchen, but it soon spilled into the garage. When it took over his garage, he thought, "Wouldn't it be neat to open a brewery?" So when his younger brother Chris began leasing a commercial space for his mobile DJ company, NRG Entertainment, it was a sign. They decided to split the lease between the DJ company and the brewery and go for it.

But starting up a brewery is no small endeavor. The Althouse bros moved facilities several times, upgrading gradually to their current 2,000 sq. ft. facility, which required some serious construction. They had to get the necessary equipment: a mash tun and boil kettle (which encompass the "brew house"), fermenting tanks, a grain mill, a brightening tank, hoses, gauges and a bunch of kegs. The brewing process — essentially, turning carbohydrates into sugars into alcohol — is like a strictly choreographed dance starring temperature and yeast; the brewers play a directional role. "It's a bit egotistical to say that we make beer. Yeast makes beer," Jeff says. Still, perfecting a recipe is an art and a test of patience, but he doesn't mind. He believes the brew process should not be rushed. "You have to let nature take its course," he says.

Jeff operates his company with this same humility and steady patience. He drives frequently to Vancouver, Wash., to pick up 50-pound sacks of malted barley, which he piles into his wife's biodiesel-powered Volkswagen Golf. When scouting out potential accounts, he likes to get to know the own-

ers personally — over a pint. If they're interested in his beer, he brings along gallon-jug samples of his freshly brewed amber ale. And let's not forget the actual time spent brewing: A couple of Mondays ago, the Althouses and a couple extra hands brewed from 9 am to 11 pm.

It's been hard work, and a long time in coming — Willamette Brewery registered as a business in April of 2004 and sold its first kegs in December of 2006. But Althouse already has 11 accounts, including Fisherman's Market, Bier Stein, Track Town Pizza and Café Zenon. He hopes to have 20 by the end of March and to expand to Springfield, Albany and Corvallis. So far the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

Megan Knode, owner of The Vintage, says Willamette's amber is "excellent" and that her customers love its smooth, balanced flavor. "They're really impressed that this is a new brewery and that this is their first beer," Knode said.



Knode loves working with the Althouse bros. "They're really attentive," she says, for they always check up on the restaurant's stock. The Vintage and Willamette partnered somewhat coincidentally: One day, Jeff Althouse's wife, Eriel, was dining at the restaurant when one of the kegs went dry. Eriel phoned her husband immediately. "Jeff was there in about 20 minutes," Knode says, with a keg of amber ale to the rescue. It's been a hit ever since.

For now, Willamette Brewery seems to be gaining momentum. They've got the medium-bodied amber ale and a dry Irish stout, a recipe made at the Collaboration Brew for KLCC's Brewfest and derived by Steelhead's Ted Fagan, whom Jeff praises as an "incredible brewer." On brewing, Jeff Althouse and his brother say they are constantly challenged, but learning all the time. They've had some rough batches. "We ruined the dry Irish stout twice," he says and adds that while brewers don't like to admit their missteps, at Willamette Brewery, "Every beer that we send out is gonna be great. If it's not up to our standards, we won't send it out." As I take a sip of the silky smooth stout, I have to agree. This is one tasty beer. ■

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