

MESSY BEGINNINGS

From homebrewer to professional BY DOUGLAS E. FUCHS

**Give a man a beer, he'll waste an hour.
Teach a man to brew, he'll waste a lifetime.**

— BILL OWENS, MAGAZINE PUBLISHER & BREWPUB PIONEER

The natural path to a wasted life cleaning kegs, sanitizing brewing equipment and removing tons of steaming hot wet grain in a poorly ventilated brew house begins — usually — in the confines of a kitchen. Professional brewers, especially in the Pacific Northwest, start as homebrewers, cobbling together bits of equipment to create the “warmest lining of a naked man’s coat,” or what John Taylor, 17th century poet and alehouse keeper, called by its proper name — ale.

Homebrewers usually start by purchasing an inexpensive starter kit that contains liquid and/or dry extract, a small bag of hops and liquid yeast. Then they begin the joyful experience of destroying their kitchen. One of the first lessons learned by any homebrewer is that boiling beer, called wort, strives violently to foam up and out all over the floor. The second, and most important lesson, is that sanitation during the entire brewing process is very, very important.

Jamie Floyd, co-owner and head brewer at Ninkasi Brewery in Eugene, homebrewed beer for four and a half years before becoming a professional brewer.

“Most homebrewers start in their kitchen, which is the most disgusting place on earth,” Floyd says. “I think all homebrewers understand why its necessary to be very clean, to keep a sanitized environment, when moving on to professional brewing.”

But moving from a homebrewer to a professional brewer isn't always a simple step. While some homebrewers may attend a brewing school, from OSU's Fermentation Science program to the renowned Siebel Institute of Technology and World Brewing Academy in Chicago, many homebrewers join a club, judge beer festivals and work their way up the ladder of a professional brewery, such as Rogue Ales in Newport, where Head Brewer John Maier has almost turned out as many high-quality professional brewers as delicious bottles of beer.

Homebrewers and professional brewers are a strange crop of folks that belong more to a cult than to a guild. In the Pacific Northwest in general and in Eugene in particular, professional brewers swap specific yeast styles and bags of specialty grain and help each other without thought of anything as silly as “market competition.” Blessed by Dionysus and armed with a powerful ability to drink any beer and pick out the essential ingredients, brewers in our area work, play and drink — together.

They probably also homebrewed together all those years ago or at least can share the joys and horror stories of homebrewing, such as the “gusher,” defined as when a bottle of beer has been infected when bottled and spews forth with a vengeance when opened. Many homebrewers will open the first bottle of a new batch in the backyard, just in case.

Jeff Althouse, brewer and co-owner of Willamette Brewery in Eugene, says that the primary difference between a homebrewer and a professional brewer is that the homebrewer can brew any beer at all, with no consideration for the mass market. A homebrewer for seven years, Althouse said that professional brewers have to brew the same beer again and again.

“As a professional brewer, you are going to brew significantly less beer styles than you would be able to as a homebrewer,” Althouse says.

Or as Jamie Floyd adds, “As a professional brewer, the days of brewing the experimental homebrew recipe, such as the Buckwheat Raspberry Ginger Mint Smoked Lager, are over.”



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