

'THERE'S A NEW BEER CULTURE ALL AROUND,' NATHAN TILLEY SAYS (ON TOP OF LADDER). 'THERE ARE BEER DRINKERS WHO ARE AT A LEVEL WHERE THEY ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING NEW AND EXCITING AND IT'S NOT THE STANDARD LINE-UP.'



CHARCUTERIE AND FIELD BEER AVAILABLE AT COBURG TASTING ROOM

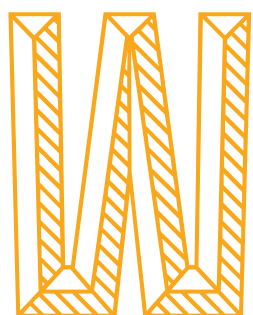


AGRARIAN GROWS A COVER CROP OF PENDLETON BARLEY, A VARIETY DEVELOPED BY OSU, ALONG HOP ROWS

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

THE FARMHOUSE BREWERY

Agrarian Ales redefines brewing in the 21st century BY ALEX NOTMAN



When Agrarian Ales was planting its first rows of hops seven years ago, an unexpected visitor dropped by.

"An 85-year-old farmer stops his pickup and jumps out and has the biggest grin on his face I've ever seen," says Ben Tilley, one of the owners and brewers. The farmer told Ben and co-owner-brewers Nathan Tilley and Tobias Schock that he used to pick hops by hand on that very field when he was a little boy.

Today, Agrarian's hops are also picked by hand, but that's not the only quality that makes the farmhouse brewery unique. From ingredients to distribution, Agrarian is bucking industry standards. Here are five reasons they stand out from the (six) pack:

Homegrown, organic hops

Agrarian not only grows its own tangy cones, the brewery grows 10 organic varieties, eight of which were developed at OSU in the past 30 years. Friends and family then handpick the hops during a harvest party during the last two weeks of August at the brewery on Crossroads Farm in Coburg.

"Nobody else is using hand-picked hops in all their beers. Nobody," Schock says.

"We have our hands in on the whole process," Nathan Tilley adds. "From the vines emerging from the ground to us putting the hop cones into the beer."

Yeast-Forward

"That third element, the yeast, is being dumbed down and swept under the rug," Ben Tilley says.

Because of yeast's historically bready and chalky quality, its flavor is rarely embraced and typically overshadowed by hops and malts. But Agrarian wants to be "yeast-forward" rather than following the industry norm of using a house yeast that all but disappears from the final product.

"There's such a range of flavor profiles that the yeast as a component of the beer can add," Ben Tilley says, comparing the range to that of chocolate or coffee.

Seasonal Flavors

A year or even four months from now, you will not be able to drink the same Ag ale that you sipped this spring. "We don't brew anything year-round," Schock says. "We're niche."

Their niche is the seasons, using the traditional French farmhouse ale — saison ("season" *en français*) — as the centerpiece of their brewery. Ben explains that the ale comes from the *saisonniers*, or Belgian farmhands, who used it as a source of nutrients and hydration. "Saison is really the style and the story of farm beer that exemplifies agrarian life," he says.

Agrarian also loves its versatility: strong or light, fruity or spicy, hoppy or malty, the saison can incorporate whatever is growing on the farm at the moment be it herbs or fruit. Seasonal, local produce is a theme found in all their pint glasses, from dandelions in the Dandy — a brown porter — to chili peppers and corn in the upcoming Cinco de Mayo release, Indigenious.

Grow(l)ing Distribution

Currently, locals can find Ag ales three ways: on tap at establishments like Wandering Goat, Bier Stein and at newcomers Party Downtown and First National Taphouse; at the Coburg farm tasting room (complete with cheeseplates, hula hoops and beautiful scenery); and at their "epic tasting room" at the Saturday Farmers Market beer garden. Further afield, Ag is on tap at Sprout! and the Corvallis Farmers Market.

Looking for something to take home? Forget bottles or cans. After the bill allowing wine and cider growler sales passed in the Legislature this spring, Ben Tilley says that growler fill stations — where beer, wine and cider can be bought in bulk on tap — are "going to start popping up really, really quick." Ag currently sells growlers (64 ounces) and mini growlers (32 ounces).

No IPA

Breathe, Eugene, breathe. Yes, you read right — Ag does not brew IPAs, but hear them out: "We love hops, don't get me wrong. I'm not an IPA hater, but from a brewery, small business standpoint, if we brew an IPA, we're competing against all the other IPAs," Schock says. "We can't compete with Total Domination and Watershed ... we brew 100 percent organic so we can't compete on that level of price."

Keep reading hop-heads, Agrarian has a peace offering: the Belgene. The hoppy, rotating saison is a hybrid of "Eugene-style" and Belgian style brewing. Take it from a lupulin lover, the Belgene is a refreshing, less-sleep-inducing-but-still-hoppy alternative to the IPA. ■