



PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

THE LABEL MAKERS

Oakshire and Ninkasi celebrate 10 years in brewing with rejuvenated design BY ALEX V. CIPOLLE

In his office at Oakshire Brewing, Eric Keskeys flips through a weathered paperback revealing hundreds of ancient shapes and patterns. The room is dark, save for the glow from his dual computer screens, where working templates of beer labels have been put on pause.

He stops on a page to point out some trefoils in what he calls a design bible — the *Handbook of Designs and Devices: 1836 Basic Designs and Their Variations*, originally printed in 1946.

“We started with a couple options and discovered these exist in this book,” says Keskeys, Oakshire’s sole in-house graphic designer. He’s talking about the logo Oakshire debuted earlier this year — a grey and white trefoil of a stylized oak — or what he describes as a modern interpretation of the brewery’s original swirling oak logo.

“It served us really well as we were starting up,” he says of the original. “We’re moving into this new direction.”

Oakshire is not the only local brewery moving in a new direction with branding; Ninkasi is in the thick of a design evolution as well. The timing is no coincidence: Both breweries were founded in 2006 and are marking their 10th anniversary year by rolling out more sophisticated aesthetics and more refined brand narratives on labels and packaging.

The shift is part of a larger trend in the beer industry. The golden age of craft brewing has ushered in a golden age of beer branding. As the craft beer movement grows, so does competition, and survival can mean a product catching the eye of a consumer when there are potentially hundreds of similar options on the shelf.

Oakshire and Ninkasi have a leg up in the fight for the customer’s eye because of a rarity among breweries: in-house art and design.

A NEW SHIRE

Keskeys says he and Jeff Althouse, Oakshire’s founding brewer and owner, sat down last year at one of the picnic tables outside the brewery’s public house to hash out a new direction.

“We were trying to figure out: What are our brand programs?” Keskeys recalls. “We were able to whittle everything down.”

Althouse and Keskeys came up with three brand programs that Oakshire brews fall into: core (flagship beers and some seasonals), pilot (experimental) and vintage (aged or high ABV styles).

“All those programs work together,” Keskeys says. “Those three shapes live inside the logo.”

He also added a striped pattern to the lower portion of can and bottle labels to act as a sort of second, textless logo.

“These stripes on all these cans, when they’re billboarded on a shelf, they’re just going to read: This is our logo,” Keskeys says.

The refined logos were just the beginning, however, as Keskeys also has been working on re-branding labels and packaging of each individual beer, from the stalwarts like the Watershed IPA and Amber Ale to the highly seasonal sour Sun Made Cucumber Berliner Weisse to brand-new brews that have yet to hit the shelves, such as a Baltic porter.

“Outdoor recreation is a big part of our identity,” Keskeys explains, but “let’s maybe make it so it’s not the typical crest with mountains and streams” in the design.

While the Watershed IPA label does feature a mountain and a stream (it is the *watershed*, after all), the labels for Overcast Espresso Stout, Reclamation Lager and others are like short stories. The lager, for one, features a handsaw and a wood-grain crest.

The new look is sharp, bright and iconic with a tinge of retro — a departure from the neutral-toned uniform labels of yore. The designer says his inspiration is rooted in the late ’70s, when President Jimmy Carter signed a law legalizing homebrewing of beer with higher than 0.5 percent alcohol content, and a “weird little renaissance” in craft brewing took off.

“I kind of asked myself the question: If I was working in a props department and making beer for a movie in like ’78,” Keskeys says, “how would I make that beer look?”

The new design templates paired with Oakshire’s new labeling process allows for unprecedented flexibility in everything from a beer’s seasonal identity to the size of the batch and the timing of its release. Oakshire recently discovered that its bottle labeler also works for cans.

“We can decide on a beer two months ahead of time,” Keskeys says, pointing out that most new beers have typically had to be planned a year in advance. “We can wrap them