



ABOVE: DOUG AND BRIAN COOMBS WITH MATT VAN WYK

BELOW: BRIAN COOMBS

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA



ALL ABOUT THAT BARREL

A lesson in barrel-aged beers from the new Alesong Brewing & Blending *BY WILLIAM KENNEDY*

One of Eugene's newest breweries features some familiar faces: Matt Van Wyk and Brian Coombs, formerly of acclaimed local brewery Oakshire. In 2015, Van Wyk and Coombs, along with Coomb's brother Doug, struck out on their own, launching Alesong Brewing & Blending, a company with a unique emphasis on barrel-aged beer.

Van Wyk tells *EW* that Alesong, located in west Eugene, is an artisan brewery "that's going to mainly focus on barrel-aged beer and Belgian-inspired beers."

About 80 percent of Alesong brews will be aged in an oak barrel, whether it be wine barrels, whiskey barrels or even gin barrels.

"We're focusing our whole company on oak-aged beers," Van Wyk continues. "This is our thing. We're going to be small, but our process is focused on aging in wood."

Van Wyk explains that when aging beer in barrels, the barrels become a characteristic of the brew.

"If you have a bourbon barrel, it's going to pick up some of that bourbon-y, vanilla, toasted coconut flavors," he says. "It can also pick up the wood itself — tannins — just like wine. It provides another layer of complex flavors. You're getting flavors of what might've been in the barrel."

Van Wyk contends barrel-aged beers sometimes appeal to people who might not normally like beer. "Just have an open mind," he urges. "There are a lot of different flavors of barrel-aged beers; some are sour, some are booze-y like bourbon. You can put IPAs in barrels. Don't knock it 'til you've tried it."

Barrel-aged beers are similar to wine in many ways. "You get the acidity," Van Wyk says. "You get the fruit flavors and you get the oak flavor and suddenly you're getting something that's a little more akin to a wine than a beer."

And just like wine, it takes time for the beers to age to fruition. So it will be awhile before many Alesong beers are on the market. In the meantime, Alesong has a few beers on draft at a variety of local bottle shops, tap houses and restaurants like Bier Stein, Board and The Tap & Growler, all part of what Van Wyk calls a "soft opening."

Given the longer process and strong flavors, barrel-aged beers often have a higher price point, leading many to look at them as a treat for special occasions only, but Van Wyk says Alesong's beers will be more of an everyday drinking experience.

"Some myths built up about barrel-aged beer: It's special; wait for a holiday or a special anniversary to have it, like you would a bottle of champagne," he says. "People need to realize that it's very approachable."

Alesong, which currently does not have a retail space or an established tasting room, will have its first bottle release Aug. 20.

"That'll be a chance to come to the brewery, purchase and drink some of the bottles," he says.

Van Wyk and his partners have big hopes for their brewery: building a brewery and tasting room near King Estate Winery, southwest of Eugene.

For more information about Alesong, and the Aug. 20 release event, go to alesongbrewing.com. The brewery is located at 1000 Conger, Unit C in Eugene.





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