



Photos by William Dean

LEFT: Tracy Phinney has a ready smile at Reach Break Brewing. MIDDLE: Heather Miller works the taps at Buoy Beer Co. RIGHT: Kathleen Rooen pours a beer at the Astoria Brewing Co. taproom.

The art and wisdom of Astoria's beertenders

Locals tell of time spent learning, sharing

BY WILLIAM DEAN

What's great about beertenders? The exquisite detail in which they can tell how the booze they pour is made. In Astoria, their contribution to the thriving craft beer scene is vital, an ingredient almost as essential as hops and malt.

These folks don't just fill glasses, they're also teachers and tour guides. In the city's taprooms, they stand ready to answer questions about each style of beer. They pour samples with a smile because they know it's an important part of discovering the world of brewing.

The best beertenders, like the trio below, have a passion for craft beer that nearly matches that of the brewers themselves.

Heather Miller, Buoy Beer Co.

Looking back, Heather Miller is astonished that she's been sharing the art of handcrafted beer for more than 20 years. For Miller, the profession started accidentally, with a job at Deschutes Brewery in Bend. At the time, she was more interested in the benefits package than the beer.

"I knew nothing about craft beer. Absolu-

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After the partial collapse of Buoy Beer Co.'s building on the waterfront in Astoria last month, the craft brewery has calmed beer lovers' fears by opening a summer pop-up pub downtown in the Astoria Food Hub building on Marine Drive. In a sign of solidarity, some local breweries have added Buoy beers to their taps. Fort George Brewery went even further, pledging to help with production in any way.

lutely nothing," Miller said. That quickly changed, thanks to brewing classes, countless tastings and a desire to find the right words to convey the essence of each beer to the casual drinker.

As she and her husband traveled across the Northwest, she worked at breweries in Portland and Seattle. Her first job in Astoria was at Fort George Brewery. Most recently, she's been at Buoy Beer Co. since 2017.

One of her skills is quickly sizing up what kind of brew a person would enjoy if they're new to craft beer. A gentle question or two followed by a sample. The best part of the job? "Meeting new people every day," she said.

Tracy Phinney, Reach Break Brewing

They aren't customers to her. "This is my house, and they are my guests," Tracy Phinney said. "As soon as someone walks

in the door, I immediately say hello."

Phinney has honed that welcoming spirit as a beertender for the past five years, most recently joining Reach Break Brewing in May 2020.

Through conversations with brewers and some reading on the side, she's learned a lot about the art of brewing. When a special beer is released, she quizzes the brewer about ingredients and flavors. Before she pours it, she samples it.

Steering people to the right beer is one of the most satisfying parts of her job. "We need to be able to describe the beer to our guests," Phinney said. "A lot of the people who come in here have never been to a brewery before," she added.

Kathleen Rooen, Astoria Brewing Co.

Generations of her family have lived in Oregon, stretching back to some of the

state's first pioneers. But somehow the state's embrace of craft beer escaped Kathleen Rooen, that is until 2014, when she joined Fort George Brewery.

"Zero," Rooen said of her beer knowledge at the time, "I really had no clue about it." She's been learning ever since, both by talking to brewers and devouring books on the subject. Today, she works at Astoria Brewing Co. as both a beertender and manager.

"This is my living room, and I want you to be comfortable," she said of her approach. "I want you to learn about beer."

Rooen took time off to welcome a baby when Fort George closed due to the pandemic but was lured to Astoria Brewing Co. last year by the prospect of reimagining its downtown taproom as a craft beer oasis.

Besides being something of a beer ambassador, Rooen takes pride in serving people varieties they'll love. She often starts with a seemingly backward question, asking "what beer don't you like?" Then there's the sample or two, and the smiles.

William Dean is an author with a passion for craft beer. His suspense novels, "The Ghosts We Know" and "Dangerous Freedom" are available in bookstores. Contact him at williamdeanbooks@gmail.com.