

HOME

By DANIEL STURM

This is a story about the art of making beer. It was a cold afternoon when I met Thom Cannell, a local beer connoisseur at Harper's, a combined microbrewery and brewpub in East Lansing. And it was a magical moment when we began tasting beer (they have six different beers on tap). Cannell inhaled, took a whiff of his sleeves, and exhaled before taking his first sip of the brown beer in front of us. "Your sleeves are neutral, so you can better perceive the maltiness and the bitterness of the beer," he explained, as if it were the most natural thing.

After 30 years of creating his own wine, Cannell finally began to appreciate craft-brewed beer, or beer that isn't pasteurized and smells very different from the mass-market beers. "This sounds snobby, but if you look at the amount of variables, beer is really more complex than wine." Different types of yeast added a fresh bread-like smell, and the variability of grains gave beer its specific malty flavor, hops created its characteristic bitterness.

A few beers later, Scott Ishem, Harper's head brewer, joined us at the table. The very rich brown beer we were drinking was a result of the two men's friendship, I learned. Ishem called it "Thom's Best Brown," because he was inspired to create it after tasting a fresh batch at Cannell's house. Making good beer is an art, one could say.

Fascinating, I thought, just like Manet and Degas inspired each other in painting.

The Homebrewers

Photos: Daniel Sturm/City Pulse

Scott Ishem is the head brewer of Harper's Restaurant at 131 Albert St in East Lansing.

There are roughly 500 homebrewers in Mid-Michigan, many of whom join

clubs such as the Capital Area Brew Crew in Lansing, Mid-Michigan Maltmeisters in East Lansing, the Red Ledge Brewers in Grand Ledge, or the Firkin Homerackers in Williamston. There are only two microbreweries in the Lansing area, Harper's and Michigan Brewing Co. in Webberville, and to fill the demand people are making their own.

Homebrewers love their own beers, which are as fresh as beer can be. They say Anheuser-Busch, Budweiser and Miller are brewed technically correct, but from the moment they're pasteurized, filtered, and put in a bottle, their flavor is lost. Whereas mass-market beers have a budget, microbrewers can add as many ingredients as they like. "When you make your own beer or buy fresh beer from a microbrewery, the flavor difference is just incredible," says Karl Glarner, who owns the Red Salamander beer supply store in Grand Ledge.

Glarner argues that all the big Pilsner breweries make beer with no aftertaste because they assume Americans just want something cold to drink, with alcohol in it. "The only thing really with no aftertaste is water. It's refreshing, clean, and has no aftertastes and those are the same terms that are used by mainstream breweries to describe their beers." In contrast, Glarner said he liked drinking beer primarily because of the flavor -- the more flavor the better.

There are 65 breweries in Michigan, each making 10 to 12 different beers sorts, but there are not many restaurants in the region that actually serve craft-brewed beers. According to the American Homebrewers Association, the national average of people who brew their own beer is 1 percent or less.

Glarner says that the best part of his job is when people stop by to share their freshly brewed beers with him. The most extraordinary batch he ever tasted was a chili pepper micro beer. He's heard of people who add toasted hemp seeds to their beer for an extra kick. It's hard to tell what homebrewers have in common besides an apparent love for good beers, he said. "My customers come from all walks of life -- factory workers, CEOs, attorneys and doctors. I have people that are interested in the technical side of it, and I have people that are interested in the creative side of it. Some of my brewers even keep a log book."

Potterville resident Ray Johnson brews beer in a three-keg system heated by propane burners.

One of these more sophisticated homebrewers is Ray Johnson in Potterville, who's brewed 30 different kinds of batches within the last 12 years. Johnson, a Web applications designer for state

government, owns an elaborate homebrewing system. "Most homebrewers don't have anything that's even remotely close to this," he said, proudly revealing his three-keg system. Johnson was a passionate beer lover. One could learn to appreciate beer, he thought, but to love beer, well, that was a more innate gift. "I was born as a beer lover," he said.

Craft beer was really hard to come by in Michigan back in 1991 when Johnson started. At the time, he didn't know anybody in Lansing who brewed beer. But still inspired, he decided to buy the necessary equipment in Lansing's only supply store, called Beer Gear (which no longer exists), to start from scratch. His first batches were stove-top brews using malt extracts, or beer syrup. Over the years they became more sophisticated, with a combination of fresh-crushed grain and extracts.

Today, Johnson's three-keg system is heated by propane burners. After the water in the first keg is heated to 180 degrees, it floats into the second, where the grain is added. For about an hour the malt mingles with the hot water, creating the right starch conversion to sugar. This liquid, called "wort," then travels to the third keg, where it's boiled and where hops and other "finings" (such as dried seaweed) are added. "The seaweed helps to clarify the beer," explains Johnson. After it cools down, the beer is moved into an air-locked five-gallon fermenting tank. After about one week of fermentation, ale beers are already ready to drink. Lager beers, on the other hand, can take up to three months.

Johnson prefers brewing in the winter, because the process generates a lot of heat. The cold temperature also helps for lager beers, he told me. But two thirds of his basement was filled up with ale sorts, because they were just easier to make and supposedly more flavorful.

Karl Glarner, owner of the Red Salamander beer supply store in Grand Ledge.

When you talk to homebrewers, you'll find that they're going through all of this trouble not just because they're connoisseurs in search of a taste that isn't mass-marketed, but there's another kind of commonality: Homebrewers like to experiment, have technical skills, like to do things on their own, and (of course) they enjoy good beer. "A homebrewed beer is a form of art, it's literally a living and breathing thing, because we don't pasteurize our beer to kill our yeast, like Anheuser-Busch," Johnson said.

I met only male homebrewers in the Lansing area. Johnson said he didn't know any female brewers. He had no explanation for the fact

that few women were attracted to the art, but said he'd be glad to "see more diversity."

Beer legends

I've often heard beer lovers praise Germany's "Reinheitsgebot" (purity law). I didn't trust the argument, because I knew it had too often been used by conservative German politicians who wanted to make it harder for foreign beer brands to be sold in the German market; thus they claimed that regulated ingredients made German beer "purer."

The purity law, originally passed in 1516, had asked Bavarian brewmeisters to use only prescribed substances. At that time beer contained less alcohol than it does today, but herbal ingredients were added to make it taste spicier. One of those plants was "Bilsenkraut," or henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), which contains two substances, atropine and scopolamine, which in large doses can lead to unconsciousness or a coma. When added to beer, henbane had hallucinogenic effects. Thus getting drunk from beer must have felt quite different from today. Henbane seeds were also burned in public bath houses, to free people from inhibitions, as henbane was also considered to have aphrodisiac effects. Linguists argue that the name "Pilsner" refers to the hallucinogenic herb that used to be in the ingredients, and not to the old Bohemian city, "Pilsen."

The Michigan Brewing Co. in Webberville offers 12 different beers. Its micro beers include Mackinaw Pale Ale, Michigan Nut Brown Ale, and Celis White.

The Bavarian purity law, a beer regulation, was thus interestingly one of the first prohibition laws in European history, but it wasn't until the early 20th century that brewers actually stopped adding henbane to their beers. Politicians in conjunction with an increasingly hysterical press cater to the interest of the more puritan-leaning middle classes--and to receive their votes in return. They told people herbs would make beer "impure," and lead to more tavern fights, boisterous behavior and higher rates of drug addiction.

Hops was introduced as a replacement, and, in contrast, "It's been well documented to be a sedative, with a calming effect on people. Politicians thought that the purity law would help keep people a little more under control," Glarner said. Ironically, beer hasn't become any less "dangerous" : The percentage of alcohol contained in beer has climbed from 2 percent to 5 percent, where it remains

today.

Brewing against all odds

Glarner tells me that the excitement in homebrewing originates from the very fact that one isn't forced to follow any of these laws.

"You can add whatever herbs you want to." The fun part is experimenting with recipes and creating new kinds of beer. Glarner started as a homebrewer 15 years ago. In 1997, when he got laid off by the Internet firm he'd worked for, he walked along Red Cedar River in Grand Ledge with four months' severance pay in his wallet, and his eyes fell on a charming old empty building.

He knew that he wouldn't want to work as a professional microbrewer. "Brewers really are a kind of a cross between a cook and a janitor," he said. "They work hard, they shuffle tons of grains, and they work in high humidity. That didn't appeal to me." He knew there was a need for a supply store in the area and decided to go into that direction. His wife, a graphic designer, helped create the logo, a red salamander because when they moved to Grand Ledge, they found red salamanders in their basement.

The Red Salamander sells all ingredients necessary for brewing, such as base malts, hops and yeast. The secret of brewing beer has a lot to do with how creatively one combines the different ingredients. There are 50 different kinds of special grain, 40 different hops, and 40 kinds of yeast available, each adding a different flavor to the beer. The cheapest starter kit to begin with would be a seven-pound package of malt for \$19, which makes five gallons of Irish stout. Other than that, you only need a spaghetti pot to boil your own beer, and it takes about one week until you can enjoy the first batch.

Thom Cannell shows his homebrewing system in Lansing. The beer connoisseur joined an eight-member beer study group. "Brewing beer is not rocket science unless you want it to be," Glarner said. For a batch, one just pours the grain into a fermenting bucket, then adds water and yeast. The time involved can be minimized to just minutes. In contrast, you can also grow hops in your own backyard, set up a yeast laboratory, and do your own water chemistry.

The magic of beer is a never-ending story. Cannell joined an eight-member beer study group, so that he could become a "certified beer judge." With a slight smile on his face, Cannell said it was unfair for people to laugh when he talks about studying beer, "because they think we just drink a lot." Cannell denied this stereotype, pointing out that the eight future beer judges hardly

drink a single bottle per session. They discuss, compare, and sip the stouts of London, the soft ales of Scotland, the dry and hopsy Pilsner from Germany, and the Hefeweizen. On a score sheet they measure how clean a beer is in the bottle, the color, the aroma, the flavor, the "mouthfeel" and the overall impression on a 50-point scale.

A variety of Lansing area restaurants carry micro brewery beers. Tom's Party Store on Grand River in East Lansing offers beers from 20 different microbreweries. The owner, Rich McCarius, says 12 percent of his customers buy micro beers. "We're in a good market because of our vicinity to Michigan State University, and younger people are generally more knowledgeable about beer."

Microbreweries and Brewpubs

Michigan Brewing Co., 2582 N. M-52, Webberville, MI 48892. 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday, noon to 10 p.m. Sunday. www.michiganbrewing.com, call for tours (517) 521.3600

Harper's Restaurant and Brewpub, 131 Albert St, East Lansing. 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. daily. Kitchen closes at 11 p.m. (517) 333.4040

Travelers Club and Tuba Museum, 2138 Hamilton Rd. Okemos, (517) 349.1701. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday and 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday.

Leopold's Brothers of Ann Arbor Brewery, 523 S. Main St., Ann Arbor 48104. 4 p.m. to 2 a.m. Monday through Sunday, 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. Sunday. (734) 747.9806, Microbrewery with an integrated commercial greenhouse.

Brew clubs

Mid-Michigan Maltmeisters, East Lansing. 1st Thursday of the month; Thom Cannell, (517) 371-2058

Firkin Homerackers Guild, Things Beer, 2582 N. M-52, Webberville
3rd Tuesday of the month, 7:30 p.m.; Fred Clinton, (517) 623.6073

Red Ledge Brewers, Red Salamander, 205 N. Bridge St., Grand Ledge 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7 p.m., Karl Glarner, (517) 627-2012

Capital Area Brew Crew, Lansing. 2nd Tuesday in conjunction with Red Ledge Brewers; Ray Johnson, (517) 645.4333

Resources

General reading

- Charlie Papazian: The new joy of home brewing. New York: Avon Books, 1991.

-www.michiganbeerguide.com

Organic Brewing

www.breworganic.com

www.zeri.org/systems/brew.htm

Beer Judge Certification Program

A non-profit organization to encourage the educational advancement of people interested in the evaluation of beer and related brewed products; www.bjcp.org

Homebrewing supply stores

Red Salamander, 205 N. Bridge St., Grand Ledge

Karl Glarner, (517) 627-2012

Things Beer, beer supplies store next door to Michigan Brewing Co,

www.thingsbeer.com, (517) 521.2337

Besides party stores such as Oade's Big Ten, which carries hundreds of micro beers at three stores in the area, or the well-sorted Goodrich's Shop-Rite supermarket in East Lansing's Trowbridge Plaza, a place beer lovers should visit is Dusty's Cellar on Grand River in Okemos. The owner, Matt Rhodes, says that his retail store actually specializes more in wines, having 200 different sorts. "We only carry a little bit more than 100 micro beers," Rhodes said.

Another place to visit is the Travelers Club and Tuba Museum, at 2138 Hamilton Road in Okemos. When ordering beer at this restaurant and (yes) tuba museum, you can begin with what they call a "sampler," which is a wooden tray filled with small glasses from dark to light. Most of the beer is bottled, but every couple of weeks, Charlie's Tuba is firebrewed on the patio. Its flavor changes from brewing to brewing. The food is good, and there's live music most Friday and Saturday evenings.

Going further east on Interstate 96, in the direction of Webberville (Exit 122), you'll find the Michigan Brewing Co., housed inside a large barn. This company is the creator of micro beers like Mackinaw Pale Ale, Michigan Nut Brown Ale, Hamtramck, and Celis White.

The Michigan Brewing Co.'s sales manager, Mike Earnheart, told me that it's the third-largest brewing company in Michigan and that it recently purchased Celis Brewery in Austin, Texas, from Miller. They plan to move the Miller brewery to Webberville, adding a new 70,000-square-foot building behind the existing structure, which is scheduled for completion in spring 2004. Michigan Brewing, which was founded in 1995, employs 15 people in the brewery, and six in the beer supply store, "Things Beer," next door.

Earnheart said that the microbrewery business is still growing, and without too much competition. When he visits other Michigan microbreweries he always makes sure to take a six-pack of their own freshly brewed beer, such as Russian Imperial Stout (10%), and to make sure that he gets something in exchange. When I asked him how

hard it is not to drink beer while working in a brewery, Earnheart said he'd recently decided to live without it for 30 days. "But it's real hard, because we just set up a taste test panel, and there's literally a lot of sipping and tasting."

The brewery's small pub area offers 12 beers on tap. There's a big barrel full of peanuts, and Earnheart says people consume 25 pounds a day, and 50 pounds on the weekends. There's also a variety of flat breads and deli sandwiches to distract you from your beer -- in other words a fun place to go. Call ahead for tour information.

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