





For  
the Love of

# BEER

Local microbreweries give insight into what it takes  
to survive and thrive in a cutthroat industry



**"It smells like** Saturday morning at grandma's," says Jim Gibbon, co-founder of Amber's Brewing Co., as he reaches into a barrel of pressed malt. He munches on the nutty grain that's something like a breakfast cereal, "Try some." Its sweet scent wafts through the microbrewery's 11,000-square-foot space, signalling that a new batch is in process. The method of flattening the malt and running hot water through it opens the grains, extracting their natural sugars to produce wort, a primary ingredient in beer.

A buzzer interrupts the microbrewery's steady hum. It's Murray, the friendly farmer here to pick up the recycled malt to feed to his cattle. For Alberta microbreweries like Amber's, "support local" is a strict philosophy. But while there's much communal >>

LEFT: Amber's Brewing Co. is one of three microbreweries in the Greater Edmonton area. They use only natural ingredients and make their products by hand. Local producers even use fresh malt, which gives beer its flavour and colour from Alix, Alberta.





Clockwise: Amber's Brewery Co. bottles make their way down the conveyor belt; The crew of three at Amber's work on a meticulously timed schedule; The industrial sized bottler puts a cap on the Bub's Pale Ale; A view of the bottler; From day one of production, it takes 28 days to turn into beer, and is ready for its final stage; Sounds of clanking bottles rattle throughout the 11,000 square foot brewery.

backscratching, there's also a struggle for expansion beneath the surface of it all.

The proper term for microbreweries is craft breweries, meaning that the process is done by hand — from measuring to mixing. Microbreweries are small, but it isn't just size that

taste that keeps it interesting.

Herbst's company also strives to support local initiatives: The malt comes from Alix, Alberta and the filtered water is 100-per-cent from Edmonton. Even the labels and boxes are printed on the prairies.

breweries that is meagre. The staff at each is small, too. Amber's Brewing employs a team of three, each of them wearing a variety of hats. "I'm a repairman today," jokes brewmaster Joe Parrell, climbing down from a vat. "Later, I will be dragging cardboard to the blue bin."

"We want people to drink beer because it tastes good, not because you can buy a pack of 24 for 20 dollars," explains Gibbon, who created Amber's in 2007 as part of an MBA project when he was a student at the University of Alberta. "We want to give people another option, to taste something different."

In trying to get ahead of the larger breweries, microbreweries have to rely on taste, not shiny, holographic cans or free T-shirts. "It's always a battle with the big guys," says Gibbon. "We don't have massive marketing budgets to plaster across the TV and radio. But once people taste it ... that's the trick."

Few Edmonton drinking venues serve craft beer, but Original Joe's is an example of local support. "It's nice to give the customer something different to try," says Derek Doke, >>

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sets them apart from big breweries, it's process. Large breweries use a continuous brewing, whereas microbreweries, working with chemical- and preservative-free ingredients, do batch brewing — one batch at a time.

"We make a batch of beer, so every batch is almost like a vintage, and it takes skill to ensure that they are consistent," explains Neil Herbst, who co-owns Edmonton's oldest existing microbrewery, Alley Kat Brewing, with his wife, Lavonne. Herbst says this artisanal form of beer-making gives every batch of beer a unique, fresh

Discounting chain brew pubs, Alley Kat, Amber's and Roughneck Brewing Co., located in Calmar, make up the craft brewery population of the Edmonton area. (Over the years, other companies have come and gone, the latest being Maverick Brewing, which, due to a financial roadblock, was tapped dry in 2007 after just two years of business.) Three is a paltry number, especially when compared to the Vancouver area, which has over 10 microbreweries, according to the British Columbia Beer Guide.

And it's not just the total number of micro-





Left to right: Amber's Brewing Co. owner Jim Gibbon monitors the production process; The brewery produces roughly 30,000 litres of beer every month; On this particular production day, Bub's Pale Ale is being packaged up, ready for consumption.

president of the western Canadian franchise restaurant. "Once our customers sample these beers they often will abandon what I call the 'television' beer brand and switch to a much more interesting and flavourful micro brand. We think it resonates well with our customer base and we enjoy supporting the local guy."

**"It's supposed to be a completely level playing field. The bigger guys seem to be buying their way into the chains."**

— Jim Pettinger, purchasing agent for Sherbrooke Liquor Store

Gibbon says getting the product on tap at local pubs and restaurants can be a challenge.

Jim Pettinger, purchasing agent for Sherbrooke Liquor Store, a rare champion of craft beer, has heard from microbreweries that most local venues won't stock their beers. "It's supposed to be a completely level playing field," he says. "The bigger guys seem to be buying their way into the chains."

The best and most lucrative form of distribution is to be on tap. According to Gibbon, it's the bread and butter — a necessity for microbreweries to stay afloat. It's illegal for drinking establishments to receive payments from the breweries in exchange for tap space. "It lays it out pretty clearly in our regulations," says Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) spokesperson Christine Wronko. The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Act states, in short, that no liquor supplier may directly or indirectly give anything of value to a liquor licensee. Wronko says that if Pettinger's speculations were true, a fine could be issued based on the seriousness of the offence. "We

haven't heard of this happening recently. But we would ask these individuals to come forward to the AGLC for further investigation."

Before the liquor industry was privatized 15 years ago, there was much less options available for beer drinkers in the province. Alberta went from having about 4,000 items available

to almost 14,000. Pettinger says the more local presence in stores, the better. Rather than one local brand, Albertans could have a local section. Yet, that increased appetite for neighbourhood product never quite materialized.

"In Alberta, you're competing not just with beer, but with 14 to 15 thousand products that are available in the province," he says. "Alberta is the most expensive place to buy alcohol in the country. It's a mixed blessing, because there is far more product available in Alberta, but that comes at a price."

Local breweries aren't trying to appeal to the mainstream crowd, Pettinger says, so the companies can be adventurous in what they're doing and create a more unique product.

For an example of such craftiness triumphing, look no further than Calgary's Big Rock Brewery. "I have enormous respect for Big Rock," says Gibbon. "I think they really set the bar on how a local brewery can be."

Big Rock was born out of then-60-year-old Ed McNally's boredom with big-market lagers.

Twenty-five years later, his home brewery has gone public, producing over 1.5 million litres a month. In comparison, Alley Kat produces about 30,000 litres monthly, while Roughneck produces about 25,000 litres and Amber's about 20,000.

Edmonton's microbreweries clearly have a long way to go before they're distributed nationally and enjoyed on a large scale. That leaves one wondering why they continue to toil when there are so many factors working against them. The answer is simple: For the love of beer.

"We were sort of beer geeks," says Herbst of Alley Kat. "We loved drinking beer, making beer, and loved everything about beer." His dedication translates into more than one million bottles filled in the past year, including five standard brands, a raspberry mead and a very popular seasonal pumpkin pie beer.

At Amber's, each of its five fire-brewed beers has a story to go with it. For example, the Australian Mountain Pepper Berry emerged when Gibbon's sister-in-law stumbled across a *bush tucker*, a tasty sundried blueberry in Australia. The prized discovery is now a peppery and fruity ingredient shipped to them regularly from Tasmania. It tastes like nothing else.

"People don't realize what a craft brewery is," says Glenn Molson, sales and marketing manager of Roughneck Brewing, who notes the obvious pun of beer being in his genes. "It's a time commitment to go out and knock on enough doors and put beer on enough palates, but the rest should look after itself if you have a good product." 