

Schweizer Crafts Passion For Quality Beer With Hopskeller Brewing Company

By Bethany Prange
THE INDEPENDENT

In a community rich with German heritage, Monroe County natives have long loved their beer.

But while the old staples like Miller Lite, Budweiser, Pabst Blue Ribbon and Stag are still readily available at the local watering holes and stores, there is a new wave of brews on the horizon.

True, Americans have been making their own wine and beer for generations. But over the last two decades, home brewing has become increasingly popular with people from all demographics.

Take Matthew Schweizer, a relatively-new Columbia resident and teacher at Gibault High School who developed his love of beer brewing while living in England and the American Northwest.

Schweizer had the good fortune to turn 21 while he was living in England. A self-described "novice beer drinker" at the time, Schweizer was exposed to the best ales and lagers Europe had to offer.

Back in the United States, Schweizer was disappointed that he couldn't find beers of similar quality.

So when a foreman at his summer job introduced him to homebrewing, Schweizer was fascinated with the idea that he could make his own beer. Better still, as a skilled homebrewer, he could make beers designed to his own specific tastes.

Once Schweizer researched homebrewing techniques and got a taste of quality homebrews, he was hooked.

Schweizer developed his own skills at homebrewing while living in Oregon. Though his time there was primarily devoted to his graduate studies in history, Schweizer also found time to learn from the brewers of the American Northwest.

Over time, Schweizer developed his own distinctive style — combining his love of European ales with the skills he learned from brewers throughout the Willamette Valley and Pacific Coast.

Schweizer's roommates and fellow teachers-in-training were happy to serve as taste-testers for his latest brews. Since they were all living off meager graduate student stipends, they were grateful to have a "brewer-in-residence," Schweizer said.

With help from his roommates and other friends, Schweizer developed recipes that could be enjoyed by everyone — from the lightest beer drinker to the Oregon-bred "beer nerds" from whom he had learned so much.

When Schweizer moved back to south St. Louis County, he brought with him the knowledge and passion for homebrewing.

While teaching history at Gibault, he discovered the massive potential Waterloo had for hosting a brewery.

"The community, the historic downtown, and the



Serving Hopskeller Brewing Co. samples at Waterloo's Fall Pumpkinfest are, left to right, Deanna Beaton, Matthew Schweizer (owner), Brandon Johnson, Jon Rogles and Adam Kay.

options for the great food and drink of Waterloo's city center is a perfect place for a brewery that would be shaped in large part by what locals wanted to see in a brewery and in their city," Schweizer said.

But as passionate as he is about brewing, Schweizer knew the transition from homebrewing to planning a brewery would take a lot of work and commitment.

First, they had to come up with a name. Hopskeller Brewing Company arose out of an old German word — Rathskeller, sometimes spelled Ratskeller — which is a bar or restaurant in the basement of a town hall.

"It was a process of naming things that invoked that but was still really unique,"

Schweizer said. "Hopskeller is memorable and fun and still has that little bit of German heritage in there."

In February, Schweizer entered his homebrews in the 2014 Taste of the Region festival where eager crowds enjoyed nearly 15 gallons of his brews.

The festival helped pique serious interest in a brewery in downtown Waterloo. Mayor Tom Smith and other local civic leaders rallied around the idea.

"Hopskeller Brewing became more than just a lone brewer's dream; it became an extended community of local residents, family, and friends who, together, are developing what we all hope will be the perfect brewery experience in Waterloo," Schweizer said.

Over the last nine months of planning, Schweizer and his supporters have laid the groundwork for a brewery in Waterloo.

"We are the first to realize how much of a community venture this has been, and how instrumental the people of Waterloo are in our project,"

Schweizer said. "We have received nothing but support from local businesses and residents; ideas and insights that we would have never considered often came from the unlikely of places. Our love of this city is at the very core of our business model, and we look forward to continuing to let the community shape how we grow."

Schweizer, 29, says he hopes that the brewery will be a place where Monroe County residents can enjoy great, hand-crafted beer. But he also hopes it will serve as a tourist destination for those venturing to see all Waterloo has to offer.

The brewery is still in the development phase but they do have a location in mind, Schweizer said. If you would like to follow Hopskeller's progress, check out their Facebook page.

You may have already sampled some of Schweizer's brews at booths at Waterloo Pumpkinfest and Gibault's Oktoberfest. This month, Schweizer was asked to donate beer to a charity benefit for Marian School in St. Louis.



Hopskeller Brewing Company's Matthew Schweizer offered samples of his freshly-brewed beer during Waterloo's Pumpkinfest. Showing their approval for the new brew are, left to right, Mayor Tom Smith, Dan Kennedy and Allan Toerjes.

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