

Geography the mother of invention for local brewer



Founder and president Tom Smellie (right) with brewmaster Andrew Kohlen and Operations Manager (aka Den Mother) Deborah Whiteley show where the magic happens at the Hockley Valley Brewing Co. in Orangeville by showing off some of their new products. Photo by Lindsey Papp

By Lindsey Papp

Mid-June marked the release of a new addition to the Hockley Valley Brewing Co.

The Hockley 100 has hit shelves, introducing beer drinkers to a recipe of locally-sourced materials and ancient grains. On the heels of the success of this latest release, if you thought a well-deserved break in the chaos of production was in order, you would be wrong.

If the term "relaxed atmosphere" ever crossed your mind when thinking of a brewery, you would throw that thought out the window after five minutes watching founder Tom Smellie work.

He ruffles through mountains of paperwork, jumping from task to task, filling orders and making arrangements to make sure Hockley's products make it from the brewery to the demanding customers, thirsting for a taste of their newest products.

In a sharp turn away from the dark beers that put Hockley Valley Brewery Co. on the map, they are now offering customers some lighter options that are sure to hit on the beer drinkers' taste buds.

Hockley 100 is one of four new additions to the product line offered this year. To give an idea of the magnitude of that statement, Smellie explained that normally a brewing company will introduce one new product a year.

"We're going to keep doing Hockley Dark, which is our claim to fame," he explained.

Second on the list was the redesign of the Georgian Bay beer can, the whole product having taken about four years to develop properly, achieving the right can and product mix. Next came Hockley 100, a product the company spent the better part of a year working on.

According to Smellie, it started out with the company Brewmaster Andrew Kohlen deciding on building a light beer. Then came the introduction to ancient grain.

When they first pitched the idea to the people at the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) head office, they were offering a certified organic beer. The response was, "Everyone is doing that, what else you got?"

Thus the idea for the 100-mile beer was born.

"So I came back all full of myself, great we're doing a 100-mile beer and we started to investigate doing it and where we can get all the materials," he said. "Turns out it's impossible to do 100-mile beer. There's not enough raw material grown within 100 miles of here. It's getting there, though."

By that time the process of creating can art had already begun, so the company decided to push through with that idea, starting out by replacing whatever ingredients they could find with local.

As it turned out, a gentleman by the name of Mike O'Hara who has been picking up the mash from the Hockley Brewery since they've been in business, is a certified organic farmer who grows spelt, an ancient grain that Kohlen had singled out for a role in the production of Hockley 100.

The resulting cycle makes the Hockley Brewery one of two breweries in the country that has a full-cycle system on the go. The mash

collected by O'Hara gets taken to his farm where they feed his cows. Sticking with the cycle, the waste from the cows fertilizes fields where he grows the grains that go into brewing Hockley beer.

"People are going on and on about organic. We actually know the guy who grows our product. To me you can't qualify your product any better than that," said Smellie. "We know the farmer, we know where the field is and we watch this stuff grow. You can't get any closer to home than that."

They have a line on a farm in the Nottawa area that will be producing 13 acres of hops.

"Over the course of a year we're going to have a 100 per cent 100-mile beer," said Smellie. "It's very light beer. Using spelt in it has really lightened it up to meet demand."

The whole process from inception to distribution took 10 months. A typical release takes six months, but he said the result was worth waiting for. The delay in the release of the product resulted in finding the perfect colors and design for the can, giving customers the ability to feel the idea behind the 100-mile product.

"It's the homey 'our neighborhood to your neighborhood,'" Smellie commented. "To find the right colour, to find what we wanted to do was tough. We went through three or four different colour changes in the can to find a gold and green that goes together well." Although he's really busy, and the brewery has been undergoing some big changes and additions this year, there is no stop in sight for Smellie. He whispers tales of expansion and increasing production, and if the product demand is anything to go by, these things are not far off.

"The target this year is to grow 50 per cent from last year and next year the target is to double in size and we'll accomplish that easily," he said. "The right product, the right people, and the right marketplace."

The third addition is a taster pack consisting of three tall cans of different flavors. And lastly, is the introduction of the final product, Hockley Classic.

By comparison to Hockley 100, the design for the Classic was easy.

"Because of the name there are very specific classic colours in the European beer industry that have been used for years; red, black, white, and gold," Smellie said.

The Hockley Classic will epitomize the classic brew, with none of the bells and whistles the 100-mile beer is wearing.

Hockley Valley Brewery ships their products across Canada, and while they're playing with blondes for the foreseeable future they haven't forgotten the dark side where they came from.

"Our big success and still is our big success with Hockley Dark. Most people look at it and think it's an English beer, and that's Andrew's recipe," Smellie remarked. "You have to have a good beer in the can and you have to have a good can to attract the attention."

He added that Hockley Dark is the largest selling Ontario craft dark beer in the LCBO system.

"That's what we would call our work horse," Kohnen said. "Are we changing, to a certain degree, but we will never stop making the dark. It allows us to play around."