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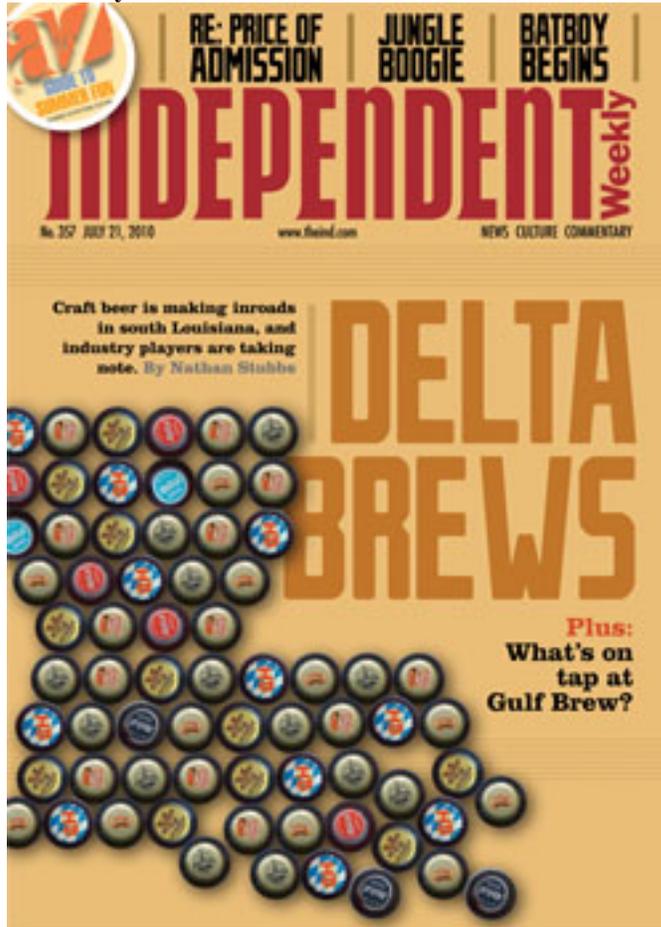
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Craft beer is making inroads in south Louisiana, and industry players are taking note.

July 21, 2010

Written by Nathan Stubbs



Andrew Godley had spent over a year building toward the anticipated May launch of his business, Parish Brewing Co., when he did what many beer lovers would consider a heinous crime: dump his supply.

"I dumped the first couple of batches because I was not happy with it," he says. "But it fortunately wasn't too much."

The issue was the water. The tap water in downtown Broussard, where Godley recently converted 1,300 square feet of rented warehouse space into a small-batch commercial brewery, differed slightly from the water he used at his home, less than five miles away, where he had developed his beer recipes.

"I didn't realize it until I had produced a few batches," says Godley. "And they were good, they were fine, they just weren't what I wanted them to be. So, I figured there was no rush, and I would have time to tweak the recipes a little bit, adjust the water chemistry a little bit and get it back to where I like it."

Tweaking the recipes involved ordering and installing a reverse osmosis system to strip the water of all its salts and other additives, then mixing them back in at corrected levels. A chemical engineer, Godley knows how much slight variations in the water can influence his finished product.

"Throughout the entire [brewing] process," he says, "different reactions happen depending on pH levels or certain elements in the water. So it really gives very subtle differences in all facets of the beer, everything from mouth feel to perceived bite to the utilization of hops and how bitter it tastes. The entire finished product can be tweaked with the water chemistry."

This scrupulous, obsessive attention to detail and nuance is a calling card of Godley's, as well as many of the compulsive craftsmen who populate the world of artisanal brewing, and is evident in the complex,

intricate beers they produce. Craft beer, as it's commonly known, has been enjoying something of a renaissance in the U.S., one that is now fermenting across south Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. In Louisiana, five parochial craft breweries have cropped up over the past five years, beginning with Heiner Brau Microbrewery in Covington and followed shortly by NOLA Brewing Co. in New Orleans' lower garden district. This year, Acadiana has given rise to two new breweries, Bayou Teche Brewery in Arnaudville and Parish Brewing in Broussard. Baton Rouge is also getting in the mix. Partners William McGehee and Charles Caldwell plan to begin operations for Tin Roof Brewing in an old Sears warehouse off Nicholson Drive near the LSU campus in August. In deciding to pursue the business, McGehee and his partner observed what many aspiring brewers have been pondering. "For a city this size and a college as big as LSU and as many people as it has," says McGehee, "we were just amazed that Baton Rouge didn't already have something like that."

"The Gulf South is basically catching up with the rest of the nation as far as craft brews," says Karlos Knott, who founded Bayou Teche Brewing along with his two brothers, Byron and Dorsey. Why the South has lagged behind the East Coast and Pacific Northwest, where craft breweries have long flourished, is a point of much debate.

"No one's ever asked anyone down here to drink craft beer," Knott says. "We've had Abita, but that's it. We're just starting to offer that choice in the state really, and people are taking notice." Knott says Bayou Teche is already five years ahead of its original business schedule. Earlier this year, Bayou Teche contracted with Lazy Magnolia microbrewery in Kiln, Miss., to brew and bottle its beer on a larger scale. Bayou Teche's flagship La. 31 Bière Pâle is now distributed in every major city in central and south Louisiana, as well as several small towns, and is on the brink of expanding out-of-state.

Plans this month to roll out two new Bayou Teche beers, Boucanée, made with cherry wood-smoked barley, and Grenade, a passion fruit wheat beer, got pushed back to August in order to keep up with current orders for Bière Pâle. "We have trouble making our orders every month," Knott says. "The demand has really accelerated our plans." Meanwhile, Parish Brewing's beer will make its commercial debut this week in approximately five bars in Lafayette Parish, including The Green Room downtown; The Tap Room and Burgersmith, both in River Ranch; and Young's Sports Grill in Broussard. Initially, Parish beer will only be available in Lafayette Parish and only on tap at select bars and restaurants. As the brand becomes more established, Godley plans to expand outside of Lafayette and bottle his beer for sale in stores. "I just want to satisfy a few local accounts that are important," he says, "and cater to people who just want a good quality local beer. It's not really about making money at this point."

Following his company motto — "Brewing uncompromised, independent craft bière" — Godley aims to maintain a high level of quality control with every keg he sends out the door. "We're not trying to get lots of beer out there," he says. "We're trying to get the best beer out there."

Photo by Robin May



In between brewing sessions, Karlos Knott often relaxes on the "tasting porch" of the Bayou Teche Brewery.

At Lafayette's Schilling Distributing Company, part of the Anheuser-Busch-affiliated network of distributors that handles the majority of the beer flow throughout the country, the stock of local beers takes up a tiny corner of a warehouse dominated with rows upon rows of Budweiser and other Anheuser-Busch products. Traditionally, Anheuser-Busch has paid its distributors a sizable bonus to deal exclusively with Anheuser-Busch products, with few contracted exceptions, a policy that's kept a tight stranglehold on which beers make it into bars and grocery stores.

That began to change in 2008 when Anheuser-Busch merged with Belgian company Inbev to become the world's largest brewing company, in the process bringing several new beers, including some regional craft brews, under the company umbrella. This provided an added boost to a craft beer industry that was already experiencing steady growth. In 2009, sales of craft brews grew 10.3 percent in a year when overall beer sales dropped by 2.2 percent, according to statistics compiled annually by the craft brew coalition Brewer's Association. Distributors saw the writing on the wall.

Brad Hamilton, Schilling import craft and specialty brand manager, says Schilling first began branching outside of its standard A-B product line in 2008 with Mike's Hard Lemonade and quickly found that it could easily make up the loss of any exclusivity bonus with sales of other products. "That kind of opened the flood gates," he says.

Over the past five years, Schilling has more than doubled its product line and expanded into beverages, including energy drinks, teas and water. In the beer market, Schilling and other A-B distributors in Louisiana have aggressively gone after the local craft brewers.

"The craft segment in Lafayette is really small, and it has room to grow," Hamilton says, noting that craft brews represent only about 1 percent of beer sold in Lafayette, whereas in other major cities, craft brews can be well over five times that size of the market. "We definitely see this segment growing, and we want



to be out in front of it," he says. "That's why we're picking up these local beers."

Establishing a new brewery is not an easy venture. A full-fledged microbrewery capable of producing some 2,500 barrels a year (by comparison, Abita is now brewing more than 90,000 barrels a year) can cost upwards of half a million dollars. Even on the nanobrewery scale (producing less than 1,000 barrels a year) like Parish, which at its current rate will produce about 150 barrels this year, brewers face extensive upfront costs and time. In Louisiana, ranked by the Brewer's Association as one of the toughest states for

Andrew Godley of Parish Brewing Co. is introducing two beers, Canebrake and Biere Amber, to be sold on tap in select locations.

craft breweries to operate, it's even more difficult. Both Parish and Bayou Teche spent more than a year obtaining all the necessary permits and commercial licenses. Louisiana's high beer taxes and three-tiered distribution system — which prevents brewers from selling their products directly to consumers or retailers, requiring that they instead go through a licensed distributor — adds another hurdle to reaching the marketplace. According to the Brewer's Association, Louisiana is one of a minority of 15 states that forbids breweries from self-distributing their product.

"It is hard to get going in this state," acknowledges Bayou Teche's Knott, "but once you get going it seems like everybody's really backing you because you're local." He credits other craft brewers in the region, especially Heiner Brau, Nola and Lazy Magnolia, with being incredibly generous and helpful in lending their time and expertise to helping him and others get started. Also, he says the three-tiered system in Louisiana has its advantages. Once a brewer has signed with a distributor, it's very difficult for a distributor to then drop that product, and they generally have the expertise to best promote a beer and get it out to the

public.

“They’re as committed to you as you are to them,” Knott says.

Matt McKiernen, craft brew manager for Anheuser-Busch’s Southern Eagle Distributors in New Orleans, says the partnership between A-B distributors and craft breweries is mutually beneficial.

“There is no better distribution network in the state of Louisiana,” he says, “to take hold of these craft beer brands and to make the biggest impact with them and to give the little microbreweries the best chance for success, and they’ve embraced that. It’s good business. We’re proud as can be to be a partner with a lot of these local breweries.”

McKiernen, who previously worked at Lazy Magnolia, is well aware of the impact local breweries have been having in the market. “It’s been amazing to see the public really latch onto these brands,” he says.

“They feel an emotional connection. These [craft brewers] have an unbelievable passion for what they’re doing. That passion is what customers tend to really latch onto.”

“The growth has been tremendous,” McKiernen adds. “Craft beer is really starting to become a part of the fabric of the state. We can now boast having amazing food, amazing arts and music and now craft beer is going to become part of that culture and it’s very exciting.”

During one of his recent five-hour brewing sessions, conducted on weekends and week nights when he has time away from his day job at Catalyst Recovery of Louisiana, Andrew Godley takes a break to enjoy the fruits of his labor. Swirling some of his deep amber barley wine, dubbed Grand Reserve, around the bottom of a tulip-shaped snifter, he examines its hue, then plunges his nose into the glass to take in the aromas. “People are conditioned,” Godley says between slow sips of the extra-aged, high-gravity brew, “to drink bad beer.” Whether it’s from the billboard effect of grocery store displays, TV ads, or numerous sports sponsorships, Americans are constantly being bombarded by America’s biggest beer brands. But people’s tastes are changing, Godley says, arguing that America’s current crop of craft beer bests the quality and variety offered in Europe. “It’s a whole lifestyle really,” he explains. “It’s about quality. It’s not about [big] brand names. You see it in the organic and local food movement, too.”

Local brewers are also using local ingredients in an effort to further distinguish their beers. One of the signature brands of Parish Brewing is Canebrake, a wheat beer flavored with Steen’s cane syrup that balances sugar cane with dry, bitter hops, citrus, and a somewhat spicy malt. Bayou Teche Brewing pays homage to its family tradition of cooking with cherry wood with its Boucanée beer, which utilizes cherry wood-smoked barley.

The complexities of craft brews can tilt beer drinkers into the kind of haughty pontifications and lucid characterizations usually reserved for the wine and cheese set. Consider this review of La. 31 Bière Pâle by Garrett Oliver, the widely respected brewmaster at Brooklyn Brewing Co. currently working as editor-in-chief of *The Oxford Companion to Beer*, scheduled to be published next year. “This beer has an attractive orange-amber color underneath a tight, off-white foam. The aroma is earth, nutty, and musty, with mild notes of fruit and mint. The bitterness stands up front on the palate, broad and brash, before the full-bodied malts pull the beer back into balance. Hop bitterness lingers after a long finish.”

You won’t hear too much of that talk at the bucolic Bayou Teche brewery, tucked among the golden milo fields along Highway 347, near La. 31. Knott, who works as a manager for Burlington Northern railroad, salvaged an old rail car with his brother Byron, converting it first into a Cajun style cottage, then into their commercial brewery. In between brewing sessions, the Knott brothers pass the time on the “tasting porch,” playing accordion and guitar and sipping their smoked Boucanee ale.

The brewery itself consists of a screened-in porch kitchen and a small room with six fermentors with a window unit set on 66 degrees. On the side of the house is a walk-in cooler where the kegs are stored. This year, the Knott family hopes to break ground on a full-fledged brewery with a bottling line, where they can then do all of their brewing in-house. Already, their La. 31 brand has attracted beer aficionados, and even a couple of tour buses, from around the world wanting to see the quaint Arnaudville brewery.

“There’s not a lot to see,” Karlos acknowledges of the small-time brewing operation. “We usually just put them up here on the porch and start bringing out beer.”

Karlos first experienced the world of craft beer while stationed overseas in Germany and became an avid home brewer when he returned. Being able to see La. 31 as one of the first craft beers to make it in some of the small mom and pop stores around Arnaudville — it’s sold at the Breaux Bridge Fruit Stand and should soon be available at Fred’s in Mamou — has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the job.

“We’ve met so many great people,” Karlos says, “and that’s been the real profit of this.”

What’s on Tap at Gulf Brew 2010?

The Gulf Brew craft beer festival is Lafayette’s biggest beer soiree of the year. Scheduled to be held in Parc International Saturday, July 24, from 6 – 10 p.m., this year’s event promises to be the biggest yet, with more than 100 beers to sample. Due to the growing contingent of craft brands from in state and along the Gulf Coast, it’s also becoming more of a showcase of local talent. Here are our picks for the best regional

beers sure to be crowd pleasers at Gulf Brew 2010. For ticket information, call 233-7060 or log on to AcadianaCenterForTheArts.org/Gulf-Brew.

Parish Canebrake – Spiked with local sugar cane, toasted wheat and citrus notes enliven this full-bodied yet crisp and refreshing ale. Perfect for a hot afternoon.

Parish Envie American Pale Ale – Anyone with an envie for hops will love this nicely balanced golden ale packed with bitter herbs, caramel malt and pine flavors.

Bayou Teche Boucanèe – Billed as a “lightly smoked” hefeweizen, Boucanèe’s cherry-smoked barley gives a smoky, full-bodied punch but remains surprisingly light.

Bayou Teche Grenade – Passion fruit adds just the right tropical, guava-like sweetener to this light, flavorful wheat beer.

Nola Blonde Ale – A medium-bodied traditional American blonde ale, Nola Blonde has just the right amount of hops and citrus, leaving a nice, crisp finish.

Nola Brown Ale – Full-bodied and smooth, an English dark mild ale that balances traditional nut brown flavor with hints of spice and molasses.

Heiner Brau Strawberry Ale – A fruit beer done right, with subtle strawberry flavor in a traditional cream ale that leaves a refreshing finish without being overpowering.

Abita Jackamo IPA – Hints of grapefruit and passion fruit embody this full-flavored IPA, which has a strong herbal nose and clean aftertaste.

Abita Andygator – This high-gravity pale malt ale brings a nice blend of bitter hops and subtle fruit notes. At 8 percent alcohol by volume, it also packs a heavy punch.

Lazy Magnolia Pecan Ale – This nut brown ale, made with whole roasted pecans, has a subtle sweetness that blends nicely with toasty caramel malts for a perfectly rounded ale. — *NS*