

## "Vermont Beer Family Grows"

By Chris Fleisher

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\*Bradford, Vt. \*- Six gurgling buckets of frothy amber liquid sit in an unfinished room beneath The Perfect Pear Cafe. Adam Coulter, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Annie, is responsible for the contents. It is an experiment of both of chemistry and business.

He's still playing with the flavors of the fermenting beer sealed inside the five-gallon containers. In a matter of weeks, he'll have some idea of how it will turn out. In the meantime, he watches, waits and hopes it will be worthy of pairing with the gourmet dishes he serves every night.

It is, perhaps, as excited as he's been since he bought The Perfect Pear in June 2004. "I kind of feel recharged again," Coulter said last week, a few hours before the dinner rush.

Coulter figures he is about two months away from joining the ranks of homebrewing hobbyists who have turned their passion into a profession. He received town approval in May to add a brewpub at the restaurant, and he is now seeking his federal license to brew beer.

He has his equipment and a general plan for the bar and brewery. If all goes well, he'll be serving his first pints in the restaurant by January and open the downstairs brewpub by May. And when that happens, Coulter will be the latest addition to a regional craft brew industry in a region that has been only too happy to encourage it.

With 19 (as of last year), Vermont had more breweries per capita than any other state in the union - one for every 32,698 residents - according to the Brewers Association, a Colorado-based trade group for the craft beer industry. Maine was not far behind on the list at number four, and New Hampshire ranked 11th.

And while the total number of breweries doesn't begin to approach those of states out West such as California (221) or Washington (100), the influx of brewers to northern New England begs the question of why this region has latched onto craft-made suds, and how many more brewers its rural communities can support.

Brewers and industry analysts believe the state can handle quite a few more. Sean Lawson, who launched Lawson's Finest Liquids in a barn beside his Warren, Vt., home a year and a half ago, is among the faithful. "Vermont is certainly the kind of place that could support a brewpub in every sizeable town," Lawson said.

Why Vermont?

Theories abound as to why craft brewing has caught on in Vermont.

It's not because Vermonters consume more beer than residents of any other state. Last year, the average Vermont resident threw back about 32 gallons of beer, ranking it 22nd among all states for per capita consumption, according to the Beer Institute, a Washington, D.C.,-based advocacy group for the industry.

Of course, not all Vermont-made beer ends up consumed in the state. A good portion of it crosses the river into thirsty New Hampshire, which ranks second in the nation for per capita consumption (43 gallons).

But the proliferation of brewers in Vermont goes beyond any supply-demand argument. Some point to cultural distinctions.

Brewers Association Director Paul Gatza: "When I think of northern New England States, I think of an attitude where people don't just accept the status quo."

John Kimmich, co-owner of The Alchemist Pub and Brewery, in Waterbury: "There's a lot less (expletives) in Vermont than there are in other places in the world. Vermont is incredibly unique in that sense."

Others say it comes from the surging interest in the state for handcrafted products and the "slow food" movement, which has embraced locally grown, all-natural and artisanal products, from gourmet goat cheese to local ciders and, of course, small-batch beer. Vermont even has its own vodka distillery, Vermont Spirits, which uses maple sap, pure milk sugar and Vermont spring water to make its libations. The St. Johnsbury distillery is making a move soon to Windsor, where it will set up near the Harpoon Brewery just off Route 5.

"Folks in Vermont tend to have a real appreciation for stuff that is craft made, stuff that is artisanal," Patrick Dakin, head brewer at Jasper Murdock's Alehouse in Norwich.

At The Perfect Pear, Coulter certainly subscribes to the "artisanal" theory. He has seen it first-hand during a series of beer-food pairing events he organized last winter. He would feature samplings from one brewery to accompany each course of a prix fixe menu.

Coulter had done the dinners sporadically over the past four years, but last winter decided to make it a regular monthly event running January through May. He wasn't sure what to expect.

"They started off well-attended," he said. "And the last three sold out with waiting lists."

Coulter has been aware of craft brew much longer than he has been making it. He'd seen it years ago when he was the executive chef at the Norwich Inn, watching people flock to the pub, Jasper Murdock's Alehouse, for then-owner Tim Wilson's line of English-style ales.

At the time, Coulter said he'd had no interest in brewing himself. It was only after he left the restaurant to buy The Perfect Pear in 2004

that he started making his own beer. It all started innocently enough.

"I started brewing myself three or four years ago," he said, "and I originally intended to keep it just as a hobby."

Then he started getting compliments. Friends who'd tried his chocolate chipotle stout suggested he should sell it. He started brewing more often, improving his skill and continuing to get compliments. By late 2007, he was seriously considering adding a brewery to The Perfect Pear.

His motivation, however, was more than just a desire to live his hobby. Coulter, who is 42, has spent more than two decades in the kitchen. He was looking to get out and try something new.

"Being able to interact with the customers is more of a driving factor," he said. "It's a big driving factor." It would also give customers another reason to go there, especially during the slower spring months. Eventually, Coulter said, he'd like to bring in someone to run the kitchen while he takes over the brewery and acts as general manager.

Before that happens, however, Coulter said he must be ready for the crush of beer aficionados he expects will crash his doors. "One thing everyone has warned me is to be ready," he said. "When you open the doors, they're going to come."

Soaked in Beer

Vermont's largest city, Burlington, boasts five breweries, including the oldest one in the state, Vermont Pub and Brewery. That downtown brewpub is celebrating its 21st year in business this month. Since Vermont Pub served its first pint in 1988, others have joined them. The Magic Hat Brewery, Zero Gravity at American Flatbread, Three Needs and Switchback Brewing Co. are all located in the greater Burlington area.

The city of around 40,000 also plays host to the annual Vermont Brewers Festival every July. Burlington beer drinkers have welcomed it all, said Vermont Pub co-owner Mick Bowen.

"There is no over-saturation," he said last week. "There's no animosity among all of us. It's been a very good relationship."

Coulter has even turned to would-be competitors for help. He has consulted with Dakin, Jasper Murdock's current head brewer, and Ray McNeill of McNeill's Brewery in Brattleboro. Dakin said he's been willing to lend advice, in part, because he doesn't really view Coulter as a competitor. Dakin said he's content to carve out his own little corner of Norwich, which already keeps him plenty busy, and do what he can to grow the state's beer industry elsewhere.

There is some shared-financial incentive. Building an ecosystem for food or beer, as in Burlington, that draws more enthusiasts to a region has a way of benefiting everyone, he said.

"Almost everyone in Vermont will tell you that brewing in Vermont is not a zero-sum game," Dakin said. "There simply cannot be enough good

breweries in Vermont as far as the brewers are concerned."

Tim Wilson, who started Jasper Murdock's in 1993 and has also consulted with Coulter, said visiting breweries can be something of a hobby for enthusiasts. Even before he opened Jasper Murdock's, he was getting visitors from Colorado and Maine who were asking about his brewery. The phenomenon is not unlike people who schedule vacations around visiting baseball stadiums.

"For some people, you collect beers like you collect baseball hats," Wilson said. "There are people who travel anywhere just to say they've tried all the beers in New England."

The camaraderie among Vermont's brewers also has something to do with their small size. Gatza, of the Brewers Association, said the bitter beer battles are usually fought in grocery stores. But for an operation like the Norwich Inn, which only sells straight from the brewery, that's not an issue.

"Where saturation becomes an issue is for shelf space for the micro brews," Gatza said. "Getting in the retail store is difficult. And once you're there, if you're not performing for that retailer, you're out."

Many of Vermont's 19 brewers are small, even tiny one-person operations, with limited distribution, if any. Coulter has no plans to distribute in stores.

Lawson, who calls his setup a "nano" brewery, expects to make only 75 barrels of beer, or about 2,300 gallons, this year. By comparison, the world's largest beer manufacturer, Anheuser-Busch InBev International, produced 456.8 million barrels worldwide last year, according to the company.

Even by craft beer standards, brewers such as Lawson and Jasper Murdock's, which makes about 225 barrels annually, are small. Boston Beer Co. is the largest craft brewer in the United States. The maker of Samuel Adams sold nearly 2 million barrels last year.

Startups such as Lawson don't even bother to compete. He distributes his beer himself and hasn't ventured outside the Mad River Valley. The only places to get it are at local farmers markets, a couple restaurants and the Warren general store.

He suggested, however, to call first before making the trip to pick up some bottles. The store sometimes sells out before he can get back to restock the shelves.

"The biggest challenge has been finding time to do it all," Lawson said.

#### Staying Small

Coulter's "brewery" could be considered nano, even by Lawson's standards. It is essentially, a larger version of his homebrew setup, with three 15-gallon stainless steel kettles perched on a 6½-foot long black enamel frame on wheels. This so-called "Brew Magic" system, made by Ohio-based Sabco, is Coulter's new toy.

It was some upfront expense – the system retails for about \$5,600 – but Coulter is clearly pleased with it. He rolled the contraption away from the wall to get a better look. “We’ve taken it for a couple of test runs,” he said, “and it is as good as they say it is.”

Coulter figures he can make about 10 gallons per batch. Even if he were to brew three times a week, every week of the year, he still wouldn’t match Lawson’s “nano” brewery in Warren.

But there are some advantages to being small, said Dakin of the Jasper Murdock’s. “If something goes wrong, you don’t serve it,” Dakin said. “You swallow that as a lesson.”

A 10-gallon batch of beer is roughly a \$50 investment for ingredients, which isn’t going to break the bank, even for a small business such as Coulter’s.

Most of The Perfect Pear’s initial offerings will be a pretty standard line of ales, though Coulter said he’s prepared to experiment. He plans to make his chocolate chipotle stout and, eventually, get into some Czech-style lagers. The restaurant has four taps, three that will feature a rotating selection of whatever he’s brewing. Coulter also plans to sell growlers – a half-gallon jug – from the brewpub.

The flavors he settles on don’t have to be terribly exotic or special in order to be successful, Dakin said. The beers Dakin makes at Jasper Murdock’s are fairly traditional, without the high alcohol presence or huge hops that lately have become popular.

“If you can make consistently good beer, that’s the real challenge,” Dakin said. “As long as you’re making a consistently good beer, you don’t have to create a niche for yourself.”

Nor do you have to appeal only to local tastes, Coulter said, though he wants to keep his Bradford customers happy. Instead, Coulter said, he would look to his menu, finding styles that pair well with the food. If he feels like straying in a new direction, however, he said he’d explore.

As long as he’s putting out good, interesting beer, he figures there will be someone there to drink it. That person might be a Vermonter. Or not.

“There’s beer geeks everywhere,” he said.