The Blue Cat Brew Pub opened 15 years ago this year, and given its institutional status in the Quad Cities, it's hard to believe that starting out, its proprietors knew next to nothing about how to brew beer or run a brewpub.

As co-owner and brewmaster Dan Cleaveland tells it, his sister Martha wanted to open a bar/restaurant, and after she learned about the brewpub model, she saw a business opportunity: There were no brewpubs in the Quad Cities.

Dan had never brewed beer. "She thought I'd make a good brewer," he said last week. Why? "I was a scientist, I guess."

Cleaveland has degrees in physics and chemistry, and at the time he was working in the pathology department for the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics. He said he was bored "doing the same thing over and over again. So I was looking for something else."

He said the prospect of brewing was "intriguing. Didn't know anything about it."

Cleaveland might not have known anything about brewing, but he did know about beer - somewhat unusual in the early 1990s. "I was drinking Guinness back when you couldn't pour that into a clear glass without people staring at you," he said.

And Martha was correct that a science background - particularly chemistry - suits one well for brewing, with the emphasis on cleanliness. (As one brewery founder said: "Brewing is 90 percent janitorial.") "Coming from my science background, I was used to having to keep everything very clean," Cleaveland said.

And, of course, chemical and biological reactions turn water, cereal grains, hops, and yeast into a carbonated alcoholic beverage.

That's why, to Dan, brewing wasn't something he had to learn from scratch but "basically just me picking up another procedure. ...

"I did have a slight advantage, knowing what was going on" in terms of chemistry, he said. "But because of their backgrounds, they [other brewers] had a wider understanding [of beer]. I had to learn about the different flavors of the malts, and different hops."

"I Have No Idea Until It Comes Out on the Tap"

Before opening a brewpub, most people learn to brew beer at home, in small batches. Not Dan Cleaveland. He said he has never home-brewed.

That means that if he's developed a new recipe and it turns out awful, it's 208 gallons of awful. "So scary," Cleaveland said. "I'll do a new brew, and people ask me what it's going to taste like. And I go, 'I have no idea until it comes out on the tap.' I should get a little system, but ... ."

He does admit some minor missteps over the years.

"I did a cocoa porter I wasn't all that happy with," Cleaveland said. "It was okay. I think it would have better with chocolate instead of cocoa."

And the pumpkin fall-seasonal ale took about four years to get right. "The first year, I think I overdid it with the spices," he said. "It came out tasting like pumpkin pie."

That beer, along with brews made with real raspberries and cranberries, is a point of pride of Cleaveland, because he uses the actual fruits and vegetables for flavorings rather than extracts. "I seem to be the only one left that still uses real pumpkins in their pumpkin ale," he said. "They use extracts. I try to stay away from that as much as possible. I think it's just me being more of a purist."

Considering that Blue Cat has more than 50 beers developed over the past 15 years, it's impressive that Cleaveland had never scrapped a batch of beer.

He said he got started by reading a few books and spending a week and a half with brewer Russ Scherer, of the Wynkoop Brewing Company in Denver, learning the trade. Scherer also helped design the Blue Cat brewing system, and the equipment was brought in through a large hole in the back of the building, a former VFW hall at 113 18th Street in Rock Island.

There was also a hole in the floor to drop equipment into the basement, but workers sealed it up before the job was complete.

If he could start from scratch, Cleaveland said, the only thing he'd do differently with the system would be to add "a conveyor belt to get the grain upstairs."

Among the beers on tap initially at Blue Cat - based on Scherer recipes - were the Wigged Pig Wheat, Off the Rail Pale Ale, and Big Bad Dog. "Our three main ones have been on since day one," Cleaveland said.

After a year or two brewing, he said, he had a good sense of making his own recipes.

"**I'm Still Learning"**

By now, one might think brewing would be old hat. But "as far as I'm concerned, I'm still learning" about designing beers, Cleaveland said.

He takes classes as often as he can, and "sensory evaluation is one that I think you just have to keep doing over and over." It teaches brewers how to identify flavors and scents desirable and undesirable in their brews.

The Blue Cat will continue its periodic beer school (at which participants learn about different styles of beer and sample 12 to 15 on a Saturday afternoon) and its monthly beer dinners (featuring beer paired with food to bring out the best in each).

Cleaveland said Blue Cat still plans to open its back lot for a beer garden, and it also wants to add a bar and bandstand there. "But that'll take years to get around to that," he said.

Beer-wise, there is still plenty to explore. Michael Jackson - the late "beer hunter," rather than the late singer - lists roughly 70 beer styles.

Cleaveland said he's considered doing a grand cru, as well as "cask conditioning" some current Blue Cat recipes. That involves the beer's secondary fermentation happening in a cask. Cask-conditioned beers have less carbonation and are served at warmer temperatures.

The brewmaster said that he's unsure whether the Quad Cities would embrace cask-conditioned ales, and that uncertainty combined with the cost of new equipment makes him hesitant.

Cleaveland said he spends one to three eight-hour days each week brewing, and that his home fridge is pretty barren. "I'm here six days out the week," he said. "I'm around beer all the time. It's like the cobbler's kids who have no shoes."

But even after a decade and a half, Cleaveland said he's not bored: "There's enough diversity I think in all the stuff that you do."

And longevity provides its own rewards. This week, he will be brewing the Blue Bastard (in the style of a Baltic porter) with an apprentice. She's a young woman who, as a child, had difficulty with Cleaveland's title of "brewmaster." So she told one of her parents, "Here comes the blue bastard."

And Cleaveland himself sounds a bit like a child when talking about his brewing area, visible above the downstairs bar.

"It's like a big playroom in there," he said. "I can shoot my hose anywhere and get anything wet. Most everything is stainless so I can't break it."