

Bent River Has Big Plans for Its Beer

Written by Johanna Welzenbach-Hilliard
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Tim Koster, part owner of Bent River Brewing Company, and Rich Nunez, its head brewer, have big ambitions. Along with the company's other owners, board members, and staff, they are not content to be just a "brew pub. " Located on Fifth Avenue in Moline, the company would like to expand into a regional micro-brewery (a wholesale business) and bottle, label, and sell beer in Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin – and perhaps beyond if all goes well.

As recently as 2000, Bent River bottled its own beer, but it stopped because of low demand. Nunez said that the brewery plans to expand its distribution starting in May with bottling a possibility two or three years down the line.

Because of his desire to brew a greater quantity and quality of beer, Nunez felt it necessary to further his studies in beer-making. After serving a three-year apprenticeship under Koster's tutelage (from 1999 until 2002) Nunez made it known to his employers that he hoped to one day be a master brewer – i.e., earn his master's degree in brewing.

As a gesture of the company's commitment to its key employee, Bent River helped finance Nunez in an intensive short course (three months, 40 hours a week) at the World Brewing Academy – with the understanding that he remain at the brewery for several years after so it may reap the benefits of his knowledge. The World Brewing Academy is an organizational partnership between the Siebel Institute in Chicago and the Doemens School in Munich, Germany.

Koster, Bent River's original head brewer, was happy to hand over the reins to Nunez. "Brewing is a young man's craft," said the 49-year-old Koster. "My years of brewing are over. It's very physical." According to statistics issued by the Siebel Institute of Technology in Chicago, a brewer will stay on the job only eight years on average because of the grueling nature of the work. Nunez, aged 32, has already used up six of those years. On brew days he starts his shift at 2:30 in the morning and works until 2 or 3 p.m.

"It's necessary [to work nights] because the way the equipment is set up," said Nunez. "Everything is behind the bar, and we're completely in the bartender's way." During his shift, Nunez spends his time hauling up barrels of ingredients from the basement, climbing up and down ladders, recording everything he does in the brewing process, filling out orders, and cleaning up his mess.

Nunez took over as Bent River's head brewer in 2002. He began learning his craft in 1999 and in January celebrated brewing his 300th batch of beer –165,000 gallons.

Nunez himself admitted that 300 batches of beer in seven years is "pathetic" by industry standards; a more desirable amount would be 700 batches – 100 a year – but he hastened to add that Bent River has been through a few lean years when high-volume beer production was neither necessary nor feasible.

But Bent River has gained in popularity, Nunez said, and therefore its beer quality and production have really taken off in the past two or three years. Now Nunez hopes to produce 200 batches of beer a year.

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To become better equipped for this kind of beer production, Nunez wanted to expand his knowledge by attending the World Brewing Academy from September 12 through December 3. So much material was covered in that time, Nunez said, “it was like extreme summer school.”

The first half of the course was spent at the Chicago campus, where he learned the rudiments of beer-making. “I learned everything from growing malt and yeast culture to microbiology,” said Nunez. “We visited a lot of breweries to see how it was done.” The second half of the course was conducted at the Munich campus, where students focused on technical aspect of brewing, such as bottling and filtration.

When asked what part of the course was the most interesting to him, Nunez replied, “The yeast and the malted barley. I would never want to be a maltster. It is so intense. It has such an impact on the brewing process.”

The maltster is responsible for “malting” the barley. Once the barley is harvested, it is sorted by kernel size then steeped in temperature-controlled warm water to germinate. The seeds are then taken out of the water to stop germination and to dry out. According to Nunez, “There are different drying processes to give the grains different colors and flavors. This is called ‘kilning.’”

I asked Nunez how a maltster would achieve, for instance, a dark color and a nutty flavor. “Black malt,” replied Nunez, “is very dangerous to make because they [maltsters] take it to such extreme temperatures that it’s at the point of combustion.” He went on to add that if a silo of heated malt at a malting factory should explode, it could level a city block.

During the last 10 days of the course, Nunez and the other students had the opportunity to travel around central Europe to see hop growers and visit breweries. “We went all over Germany, to Austria, the Czech Republic, and Belgium. We saw all kinds of breweries using different equipment, but trying to achieve the same thing – a consistently good product.” One such brewery in the Czech Republic did not have modern refrigeration but used caves instead, which have a constant cool temperature. Another brewery in Germany still stoked its own fires instead of using a boiler to heat the brewhouse.

The most important things that Nunez learned during his three months in Chicago and Germany were how to get a longer shelf life for his product; how to exercise better quality control; and how to produce a beer that is consistently good. “If you’re bottling and distributing beer, inconsistency will kill you,” said Nunez.

Despite what beer snobs might think or say about Anheuser-Busch and Miller, Nunez remains impressed by these brewers’ abilities to make beer “en masse” that tastes the same in every batch and in every bottle.

“There are so many different factors involved that can spoil the product,” said Nunez, “like the microbiology – the bacteria – and cleanliness. If you don’t wash a keg correctly, the product can spoil – it doesn’t matter how well the brewer did his job. If he puts his beer in a dirty keg, it will be ruined.”

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A crisp, clean beer is evidence of a well-run, tightly controlled brewery, according to Nunez: “The lighter the beer, the harder it is to mask ‘off’ flavors and obvious contamination; it means someone is really serious about their hygiene.”

Dan Cleveland, master brewer and owner of the Blue Cat Brew Pub, is a self-taught beer maker. After spending years working in the chemistry field, he decided to change his career and open a brew pub. “I pretty much stepped right into it,” he said. “I went from being a chemist to a brew master. I just picked up the steps and I kept reading books.”

Cleveland did spend a week and a half taking brewing classes at the Wynkoop Brew Pub in Colorado, but there his formal beer-making education ends.

Regarding Nunez’s stint in Germany, I asked Cleveland if he thought it important that American brewers study abroad. “I don’t think it’s necessary,” he said, “but it gives you more depth.” He went on to say that Nunez might pick up techniques and tools of the brewing trade that aren’t used in this country.

In addition to continuing Nunez’s education, Koster is also teaching the rest of his staff about brewing and the brewery. “We are putting together a course for our staff called ‘Brew You,’” Koster said. “It’s a course that covers what’s involved in brewing beer, a tour of the brewery, and a tasting – comparing beers. It’s a course we’ll be offering to the public.

“We want to do this,” he continued, “because this year we want to get our beer on tap in other places, so we want to ensure that other people’s staff is educated about our product and beer in general.”

One of Bent River’s goals – and one of the main reasons it helped finance Nunez’s brewing education – is to enter the Great American Beer Festival, the largest beer-tasting festival in America. “There’s a lot of competition,” said Nunez. “We’re aiming for a gold medal. If we can get anything from there, then we’ll probably go to the World Cup [an international beer competition held every two years in a different county]. That’s the crème de la crème.”