

Craft Beer Craze Still Brewing in Hotel Business **Hotels aren't just serving craft beers, more than ever they're making them too.**

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The hotel on North Tenth Street in Milwaukee had been a structure that, like its home city, was once defined by beer. Even the very name outside reaffirms its legacy: The Brewhouse Inn & Suites. But the luxury boutique hotel, which comprises two repurposed brewery buildings, is more about brewing comfort than the Pabst Blue Ribbon brand that made its home city of Milwaukee famous so many years ago.

Though the beer isn't here, the décor inside the extended-stay hotel gives a broad nod to the hotel's Pabst pedigree, said Gino Hoffman, general manager. It's still something to be proud of.



“To celebrate Pabst, each suite is adorned with a Pabst Blue Ribbon ice bucket, the original stained glass window of King Gambrinus is still in its place as well as the six original copper brew kettles – in the center of the hotel in what is now our hotel atrium,” said Hoffman. “Jacksons Blue Ribbon Pub & Grill is everything Pabst-themed to pay homage to Pabst, including a variety of Pabst beverage products and souvenirs.

“However, there isn't any microbrewing that is taking place at this time.”

Beer, in short, is history here – at least for now – and a noble history, at that. But even as this brewery-morphed-into-a-hotel goes forward in its new lager-less incarnation, hotels elsewhere are just as consciously making the mix happen. Their hotels have morphed into hotel-microbreweries. In Costa Rica, there is the Lake Arenal Hotel & Microbrewery, nestled in the middle of a 15-acre organic farm. In the heart of downtown Victoria, British Columbia, there is the Swans Hotel & Brewpub, in a repurposed warehouse building that had been used as a granary and feed store.

And in Vermont, there is the Norwich Inn, which started brewing in 1993 with a dip-your-toe-into-the-suds trial run, a test batch created here and there, by inn co-owner, Tim Wilson. Brewmaster Jeremy Hebert said Wilson “decided to take a crack at selling beer in small quantities in the pub. For about a year, he brewed several 10-gallon batches per week. Within the year, it became apparent to him that he really needed to increase the size of his operation in order to fulfill demand.

“So he built the current brewery.”

That's what has now become Hebert's domain – which he said is actually an old carriage house that had been available as Wilson's experimentation was getting under way. It “was not being used at the time for anything other than storage,” Hebert said, so it was converted into the on-site brewery, making additional building construction or renovation unnecessary. “They did move the building a bit and put in a modern foundation, water, gas and electricity, but the building looks very much like it did prior to becoming a brewery, just oriented in a different direction.”

Its new direction – both physical and operational – has won it a strong reputation, said Hebert. “The Inn's brewpub and restaurant are popular for events of many types. Corporate retreats, holiday parties, wedding functions ... all occur at the Inn throughout the year. The fact that we make our own beer is certainly a draw for many, both hotel guests and local patrons.”

One of the original four beers, Whistling Pig Red Ale, is still available on a year-round basis, but there are also special occasion brews, Hebert said. “One of the most fun beers we offer, from time to time, is the beer that the current brewer and his two predecessors [Wilson and Patrick Dakin] collaborated on to commemorate the brewery’s 20th anniversary in 2013. It is a Belgianized stout called Humble Genius. Full body, lots of interesting flavors and aromas, many of which are distinctly Belgian in character, with a pretty good punch...”

The inn always has six faucets in action and, he said, “[we] usually have a cask being served from an authentic British beer engine, and occasionally have some special bottles available in the pub.”

The beers have also achieved some worldwide acclaim, having been the recipient of four silver medals, and a gold, in the Great International Beer Competition.

The Portola Hotel & Spa in Monterey, California also could have made an elegant exit from the beer business, like the former Pabst plant, but is relying instead on some synergy between the subsequent hotel and its brewing ancestry.

The hotel’s microbrewery “was originally designed by a local craft brewer who ended up, in the end, wanting to get out of the business,” according to Sonny Petersson, director of Food & Beverage at the Portola Hotel. “They turned over the equipment to the hotel and the hotel took it on as a project, as it was a unique restaurant venue to have in a hotel. A local craft brewer was hired and quickly moved up to be an award-winning brewer.”

Petersson said several of the beers served in the hotel’s 12-tap pub, Peter B’s, have captured honors from the Beer Institute in Chicago, as well as other medals. However, “there is not one single ale or lager that defines us,” added Kevin Clark, the brewmaster at Peter B’s Brewpub. “We make many styles and interpretations of those classic styles.”

Mirroring the ebb and flow of hotel guests themselves, beers rotate and pair with the seasons as regulars. “We brew beers specifically to be consumed fresh and lively, and others to be aged months or years in barrels to achieve profound flavors. It is production flexibility that sets us aside as a brewery,” said Clark.

The transformation into a hotel-friendly space wasn’t easy. “Designing a craft brewery is very different than a regular restaurant option,” Clark said. “You want to have exposure, so customers can see the brewery in action. Behind the scenes you need space to store beer, all of the supplies to make the beer, refrigeration units, kegs and depending on your operation, the ability to bottle and distribute the beer. There are ways to conserve water during the process, recycle spent mash and become energy-efficient, depending on how far you want to invest in an operation.”

Hiring a creative, talented staff also helped – not just for beer-making purposes but also for crafting some homemade good will.

“Our team does a lot for the community in terms of partnering for special events, such as Pebble Beach Food & Wine, to community involvement helping in fundraisers for the local university and other nonprofit organizations,” said Petersson. The hotel is also able to offer its corporate clients group tours, brewer dinners and even create a specialty beer especially for the visiting executives and their staff.

The microbrewery also invites a kick-back-and-relax mindset which is, after all, what a hotel stay is often about. And the Portola wants the home-brewers among its guests to exercise their inquisitiveness and engage in dialogue with the staff – perhaps even over an ice cold mug or two.

“There is a relaxed atmosphere and it is not intimidating to learn about a beer or how it can be paired with food,” Petersson said. “There is also a wonderful camaraderie in the beer community which is truly special.” “And customers know,” added Clark, “they can come back to find another exciting beer.”