

On-Co-op-Southwestern-Connections-25-Mar-2015

Beer! I guess it's five o'clock somewhere but it still feels early to be talking about beer. But while it may be too early to be having a beer I think it's a great time to talk about brewing in London. I think it's a great time as early is relative and it's certainly time for craft brewing in Ontario. I'm David Thuss, secretary, director, and worker-owner in the London Brewing Co-operative. I believe it's not only time for craft beers in Ontario but that it's time for worker-owned breweries that have a stake in their community.

All seven principles of co-operatives are important to the London Brewing Co-op but I want to weave the theme of Concern for Community into a discussion of our history. This discussion is not brief as I'm particularly concise but rather because this is our second year of operation and so history can only be so long.

To begin with a discussion of community I want to define our community - we are located in London's historic Old East Village nestled amongst beautiful buildings, wonderful early 20th Century housing, and burgeoning businesses. We made a conscious decision to establish ourselves within this neighbourhood and to make neighbourly connections from the onset. We share our brewing space with two sister businesses - On The Move Organics and The Root Cellar Organic Café. This wonderful symbiotic relationship allows us to reduce our overall carbon footprint by maximizing the space, to unite our shared missions, to combine shipping and other business costs.

Our wider community is London and Southwestern Ontario. The "SWO." Too early to get a cheer for the SWO? It's an amazing region to live and we are blessed with the fertile lands and the hard working farmers and producers that we interact with. So how do we concern ourselves with this wider community? Our concern is to see it thrive and to that end we source our inputs as local and as sustainable as possible. This means that we buy Ontario-grown barley, wheat and rye and we buy Ontario-grown hops as often as we can. This means producing a beer, our Local 117, that contains ingredients travelling only 117 KM to arrive at our brewery. Buying this local is not the norm; Beer has a steeped history and the Germans and English produce a lot of malts that are shipped around the world. Even Canadian-grown two-row barley that is used by virtually all breweries in Ontario is shipped all the way from our Western provinces.

But what if we can reduce the carbon footprint associated with shipping these grains? What if we can interact directly with a local farmer and know who has grown these grains rather than having them blended and then shipped? What if we emphasise traceability of our inputs? Those who buy local produce know what a good season looks and tastes like - and they also know the effects of a bad growing season. We're not interested in hiding this reality in our beer - we want our beer to remind our drinkers of what has gone into their glass. Our beer is a beer of a place and of a people, a beer that connects people to the brewers, the maltsters, and the farmers in their area. Aaron Lawrence, our President, puts it succinctly: beer is an agricultural product. When we recognize that; when we consider that the primary ingredients - barley and hops - are grown on farms the next logical question is: Now what if those farms were local farms? This is our idea of plough to pint. This idea is realized through buying hops from local farms like Carolinian Hop Yards operated by Melanie and Tim. Or of buying barley from Mike at Harvest Hop & Malt. This idea of local is extended even further by growing hops in this city at the homes of the brewers and of friends and family.

This then is how we wish to engage our community and to show concern for our community. So while there are a number of ways of approaching this narrative of starting a brewery, the narrative of how we came to develop our brewery as a worker's co-operative; it is certainly not a story about "did you hear the one about the five guys who walked into a bar?". Nothing was predestined, nothing was by accident; There are easier to organize business models and certainly easier ones to explain to the uninitiated. Yet we came from this community, and the farming communities that surround London. Many of us grew up with credit unions being part of our lives, of collective bargaining and the importance of worker rights. Members of our co-operative are working every day in their other jobs helping to grow the market for organic produce and to get it directly to the doors of Londoners. As such, forming as a workers- co-operative with an emphasis on supporting local agriculture was the plan from day one.

And with the assistance of On Co-op we incorporated our co-operative in November 2013. We are the first co-operatively owned craft brewery in English-speaking Canada. The initial investment for the brewery came from amongst our worker-owners of which there are five. Each invests time and energy throughout all aspects of the operations. From the planning to the brewing it is a shared experience. As with so many co-operatives in their initial years, sweat equity has been as important as the financial equity; the continued investment of our members' time and ideas helps to enrich

our brewery and ensures that its aim remains community driven. The building of our brew house and fermentation space was performed by us with the assistance of local contractors. Our brewery has a temperature-controlled walk-in cooler for fermentation, conditioning, and carbonation. There is onsite storage for our grains, hops, and yeast, and for the finished beer. The space is beautiful and I invite you to come and visit us and the Root Cellar Organic Café.

The nuts and bolts of our brewing operation gives you an idea of its compact size. Our system is a one barrel capacity three vessel brewing system. One barrel is 117 litres or two large kegs. It is an all-electric system that has an extremely small footprint. This is a very hands-on operation and not a matter of flipping switches and watching progress on an LCD screen. We are flexing our muscles to stir the mash and using handcarts to move the spent grains to our warehouse. It is a labour of love with an emphasis on labour.

For those who have never experienced the joys of brewing beer it's effectively the process of creating a sweet liquid to be fed to yeast. Mouth-watering I know. We first take a mixture of malted grains. This particular mixture is our recipe and is developed by us to impart certain tastes, colours, and body to our beers. Every beer has a different mixture of grains and hops to produce the desired end product. To these grains we add water at a particular temperature to break down the starches and extract sugars that can be fermented by yeast. This sweet water, called wort, is then transferred to our boil kettle and boiled. During the boiling phase hops are added at different stages: the bittering hops at the beginning of the boil and the aroma hops toward the end. The bitterness of the hops helps to balance the sweetness of the beer to produce the tastes that many of us have come to love. Finally we cool the wort and transfer it to our fermentation vessels. Yeast is added and our work is done. The important business is handled by the yeast.

Beer making can be viewed as this simple process but there is as much art in the mix as there is science. We have crafted over 15 different releases to date and have released a number of beers that are made from either entirely or close to entirely all-Ontario grown ingredients. Our product mix does not contain a specific "flagship brand" but rather we continually develop recipes that reflect seasonal inputs while maintaining a large offering of customer favourites. Be it fueled by our vision or youthful naivety we were able to complete our brewing space and begin to brew in August of 2014. I think we can avoid too much romanticism if we remember that it's through the hard work of our farming partners that we are able to produce these great tasting all-Ontario beers.

Back to our community and our immediate neighbourhood. What I like about our brewery is the interaction with our community - we have had the opportunity to engage consumers who are not traditional beer drinkers. The clientele of the Root Cellar are those who gravitate toward locally and sustainably produced foods and drinks. The embrace of our beer at this restaurant reflects an opportunity to promote beer made with local and organic products to a wider audience. Our brewery strives to bring greater capacity along the organic malt and hops supply chain and new demand in restaurants that carry our product. Our production helps to increase production of Ontario-grown malts and hops and employ individuals all along this supply chain. It is our desire, through our success, to demonstrate the viability of buying Ontario grown and processed malts and hops.

So is this what makes us different? Many would point to our co-operative structure as making us different in the brewing world but I believe that being a co-op reflects the desire to build our community and to enrich it as it enriches us. As I stated all seven principles of co-ops are important to us and give direction as we continue to produce our beers. But if we can create economic opportunities in our city and in our wider community that is a real win. If we can demonstrate the success of a worker-owned and democratically run business in this sector that is a real win. If we can be a real community member and not just a business, that is a real win. So despite the early hour this is the time for worker-owned breweries, brew-pubs, bars, and everything in between. Our mission is to educate consumers about the beer they are drinking, reminding them of the local implications, and helping to generate a greater respect for a proper pint. We seek to deconstruct not just the beer, but the brewing process itself, and to make a community brewery a true member of the community.

Thank you