



FOOD

EDMONTON'S BREWING GOLDEN AGE

MARCH 1, 2018 | THAI SIRIKOONE



Is there such thing as too much beer? Even if there is, Edmonton has room for more.

Thirsty Edmontonians should be pleased to know that the city has many local breweries that offer crisp drinks to help them unwind. As it stands, there are nine breweries in Edmonton, and each provides a unique beer experience. The craft brewery scene in Alberta has been called a gold rush by some, and lately, Edmonton is a gold mine of distinct and fresh brews.

On Dec. 5, 2013, the Alberta Gaming & Liquor Commission (AGLC) removed the minimum production requirements that were previously imposed on breweries, which meant that breweries were no longer required to have big facilities and could now operate on a much smaller scale. This opened the door for micro-breweries to set up shop all around Alberta.

Five years later, Edmonton has a thriving and passionate craft brewing community that is dedicated to bringing better beers to the city.

Situation Brewing and Bent Stick were the first two small breweries to take advantage of the relaxed laws in Edmonton. It took some time for the City to come around, however, and it took Situation Brewing 14 months to open from the time they signed their lease.



"We brought an application to the City for a development permit to do a small brewery in a non-industrial location, which they were not used to," says the founder and owner of Situation Brewing, Wayne Sheridan.

"We've had that weird minimum production requirement for a long time, much longer than we needed it. So what ended up happening in Alberta, and in Edmonton too, is that there was a growing demand for not just craft beer, but locally produced craft beer. And we just didn't have the means to produce it because (the city) didn't have any small scale production."

Craft beer isn't limited to smaller breweries in Edmonton. After taking over Maverick Brewing's space in 2010, Yellowhead Brewing Co. started in the historic Shaw building, located on 105 Street beside the Bill Rees YMCA. Yellowhead's signature lager has helped the company build its brand and gain a foothold in the market, but the owners hope to explore new flavours and styles of beer.

"We have a really unique location," says Yellowhead brewer Lisa Davis. "This building is beautiful and it's awesome to be downtown. One thing that's a bit hard for us is that ... our main product was always the lager, so a lot of people know us only for the lager, and we're trying to do a lot of different things now."

Among brewers, there is a sense of fulfillment and pride in brewing craft beer in their own communities, for their communities.

Before deciding to start Situation Brewing, Sheridan worked as an engineer, but gave it up after figuring it was time to change something in his life.

"It's a really strange business dynamic. Not strange anymore, but it was strange at the beginning," he says. "The real benefit is not so much (money) — if you do it right it's sustainable. The upside is really lifestyle. You get to do something you love and the positive feedback is amazing."

"It's cool and we love it. Everybody in craft beer loves what they do. I've never met a person who is like, 'I don't know if it's for me.' It's pretty awesome," Davis says. "Everybody likes to mingle with each other. It's a nice community. It's kinda like us against the big guys."

Davis, however, took a different route into brewing.

"There's kind of two ways that you can get into brewing, and one of them is doing the school route and taking a course and then getting hired at a brewery, or having an internship, and then you learn a lot more practical brewing skills on the job. Or, you can be lucky enough to get hired at a brewery and have somebody teach you everything, which is my case," Davis says.

"I'm pretty lucky someone took a chance on me."

"Do you want something bland and boring and perfectly fine, but really uninteresting — brewed to be uninteresting or the least offensive as possible? Or do you want something that's interesting, flavourful, and produced locally?"

—Wayne Sheridan

Despite the recent microbrewery boom in Edmonton, the small brewers don't consider each other competitors; rather, they actively support each other, work together, and nurture a friendly community of local breweries. For example, Situation lends out a keg washing machine to help Bent Stick clean its kegs.

"The small brewers look at their competition as being the big guys — big, multinational beer factories, Anheuser-Busch and Molson, etc. None of those big guys are even Canadian companies anymore. Those are our real competition," Sheridan says.

"The way that small breweries win is to gain market share within that niche, and the way that we steal that market share and pull it into our niche is by cooperating to get the word out that you can have a better flavour experience and it's not going to cost you any more money."

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Sheridan asks.

Edmonton's restaurants have also begun offering more flavours and variations of craft beer to their customers while contributing to their communities and buying locally. The trend of small, local restaurants being the exclusive buyers of local beer is also changing as larger restaurants add local beers to their taps.

"We have a lot of really good relationships with restaurants and bars in the city, and we have a lot of really strong, loyal licensees," Davis says. "The experience is pretty good."

Overall, the driving force behind brewing in Edmonton isn't money or corporate interest. It is simply a passion and love for the craft of making beer locally.

"What we want to add to the community is not just giving people another great beer experience in Edmonton. They can get that at a lot of places," Sheridan says.

"We want to give them a great brewery experience — to show them where their beer is made, who's making it, how it's made, and get them engaged with the actual process and the people behind the product. That's why we're here."

Photography by Matthew Jacula.

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