

GREAT VIBES, GREAT BEER





Central Alberta, in Canada's west, is known for agriculture and oil. But more and more, it's becoming the newest hot spot for the craft brewing explosion. Leading the charge is Blindman Brewing, a craft brewery located in the small city of Lacombe, just a hop-and-a-skip north of Red Deer. With the local food movement going strong and a large local-business support infrastructure, Lacombe seemed to be the perfect place to set up shop and brew beer.

Named after a river that winds its way through Central Alberta, Blindman started with a couple of friends looking for a career change. Founders, Hans Doef and Dave VanderPlaat saw the 'craft' trend coming from other areas of North America and decided to pool talents and resources with some business-savvy "beer geeks" toward opening their own brewery. In June 2015, property had been secured and industrial bays were being converted into brewing stations. In August of the same year, equipment began arriving and, within a couple of months, Blindman was selling kegs. *Spotlight on Business* spoke with Blindman's Hans Doef and Shane Groendahl about the craft beer scene in Central Alberta, the incredible local support they have received, and their rapid growth in two short years.

By John Allaire

As we started up our brewery, we started realizing there was a lot of support for local businesses here in Lacombe," Doef explains. But just as important to a good local vibe, Lacombe possesses the agricultural infrastructure to support brewing operations. "The federal and provincial wheat and barley research stations are in Lacombe. And the Rahr Malting Corporation is just down the road in Alix. It feels like there is a full circle of connection with barley growing and now our brewing beer with that malted barley."

That connection extends out into the community alongside the role Blindman is playing in educating people about craft beer. Groendahl points out that he has seen growth in the level of understanding and appreciation for craft brews vis-à-vis macro-brewed beer. "Over the past couple of years, we have grown to become a community meeting place where people come out, meet with friends and talk beer."

They are interested in the brewery and what new things we are up to."

Education plays a significant role in what Blindman feels they offer to the community. Their taproom staff boasts an in-depth knowledge of their beers and the whole brewing process. But further to that front-line contact with their customers, there is always at least one owner/operator on hand to guide tours through the brewery and explain not only how the beer is made, but also Blindman's 'how we got here' anecdotes and stories. They strive for full customer engagement and two-way communication. To this end, they use the taproom and the tours as a yardstick on how they are being received and which of their products are popular.

"It's has been all good between the small breweries. Sharing information, sharing supplies... we're all pretty open about that, which is awesome."

Doef also points out that the cans in which they sell their beer are a form of "take-home" education. "A lot of the information on our labels and on our can designs give people information that they wouldn't ordinarily get from

other products' packaging. We obviously give the alcohol percentage, but we also give the Original Gravity and Final Gravity, the International Bitterness Units, and the Standard Reference Method."

Briefly, for those of you without chemistry degrees, the "gravity" deals with the relative density compared to water at different stages of fermentation. Basically, it determines the alcohol strength of the beer. The International Bitterness Units will tell you how bitter a beer will taste, with the higher numbers representing the bitter end of the scale. And finally, the Standard Reference Method refers to the colour of the beer.

Blindman's labels and cans also attempt to give some history and reasoning behind each beer. "We try and give a little bit of a story on what this beer is and how we came to making it. We like to think it's a little bit of an education for people, right on the product," Doef explains.

Just like old-time town ale halls and community centres, Groendahl is amazed by the taproom's uptake as a community gathering spot. "It's kind of neat to see the community rally around the taproom and our events. We try and reach out into the community as best we can with special events, local fundraisers and Chamber of Commerce events. Being a rural-based area, there seems to be a built-in neighbourly attitude. You really grow up on that. And people are using our place as their gathering spot."

This sense of community co-operation helped ten-fold when Blindman was building from the ground up. Doef points out that, growing up in Lacombe, he had contacts with most of the trade industries. This was handy when it came time to convert industrial bays into a working brewery.

"We knew plumbers, electricians, construction contractors, designers and even accountants. Their support and willingness to help was very strong."

Blindman Brewing takes advantage of the wide-open distribution system in Alberta.

The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) has a central warehouse and a web-based ordering system for



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“We are striking the balance between making the beers we want and having a high demand on the market.”



restaurants, bars and retail outlets. Blindman delivers to the ALGC warehouse, but their license also allows them to direct-deliver to the same group of customers. This means there is the opportunity for a significant amount of orders to come in from all directions. A good problem to have, one would assume. But Groendahl points out that it can create challenges that bigger breweries face. “We have the ability to reach a lot of people through these systems. And it’s sometimes a bit of a challenge because we don’t necessarily know all the places that our beer gets to. We have such a far reach with this system, that it may limit our ‘human touch’ at times.”

That ‘human touch’ finds its home with their direct delivery.

“Three days a week, we have a delivery van that’s on the road. One day in Central Alberta, one day in Edmonton and one day in Calgary. So we have that ability to reach out to our core clientele, our keg accounts, and interact with them on a personal basis once a week. So that really helps tie things together for us.”

A running theme amongst the craft movement is that breweries tend to help each other out rather than consider the other breweries to be competition. When Blindman swung their doors open a couple of years ago, there were only two craft breweries in Central Alberta. That number has jumped to about eight today, with plans for more in the near future. Doef observes, “It is trending for sure. The one crazy thing is that, right now, there are 67 craft breweries in Alberta, with a bunch more slated to open soon. When we opened two years ago, we were the 20th brewery to open.” That number could be upwards of 100 by next year’s end.

Numbers aside, Doef assures that the camaraderie still exists. “We all think quite optimistically about that. The saying goes, ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’boats’, which is true in this case. We are more in competition with the macro-breweries, in terms of market share. Generally, it has been all good between the small breweries.

Sharing information, sharing supplies, if we need to borrow equipment, or if we’re short on malt or hops — we’re all pretty open about that, which is awesome.”

Groendahl adds that the larger centres like Calgary and

Edmonton are seeing consumer uptake for craft beer at a faster pace than in Central Alberta. But he regards being located almost smack-dab in the middle between the two largest cities in Alberta as both an advantage and an opportunity. “Especially in Calgary, there is greater awareness and excitement over craft breweries. And if the larger cities are going to lead the way, I think we need to seize the opportunity to ride the wave. Even as more of a rural-based brewery, we are well-situated between Calgary and Edmonton. It’s an hour or so either way. So it makes it handy for distribution.”

Turning to the products themselves, Blindman’s flagship beer is called the “Blindman River Session Ale.” It’s a 4.4%-alcohol lighter ale that is dry-hopped with a tropical aroma

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and flavour. "It has a very dry finish but still has a lot of flavour to it. It's not a bitter beer. We use the hops to create flavour and aroma rather than extracting the bitterness," Groendahl points out.

"We focus on the flavour! We brew the beers we like to drink."

The Session Ale remains their best seller, to the point that they find it challenging to keep up with demand. Not surprising, as many new 'craft converts' tend toward the more accessible, less hoppy session-type ales as their gateway into bolder-tasting beers. Doef points out that they did their market research and concluded that a blonde lighter beer would fit nicely into their rural market. "It does sell.



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And there are plenty of examples of those types of beers selling in rural Alberta. The Session Ale is very accommodating to those people that like the blonde light beer."

But not to worry. The IPA makes an appearance in the form of their "Longshadows India Pale Ale." It's an American-style IPA, stronger and more aromatic on the hop side. It leads the charge into their list of original-recipe craft brews with stronger flavours. They brew a smokey porter, a rotating saison that changes with the season, a kettle sour and a stout, to name a few. And similar to their labels, Blindman's website will give the beer geeks all the stats they need to satisfy their palettes and their curiosity.

"The spectrum of beers is so wide, and we love beers on the whole spectrum," Doef explains. "People often ask why





we chose specific beers. Our answer is always first that we make the beers we like. And secondly, we think of what will sell. So we are striking the balance between making the beers we want and having a high demand on the market." Groendahl enthusiastically adds "We focus on the flavour! We brew the beers we like to drink."

Business growth will hopefully take them into a larger space with greater capacity.

"The Session Ale is very accommodating to those people that like the blonde light beer."

But they're still trying to wrap their heads around what that might look like. Growth has come so quickly that they find themselves in the enviable position of positive unpredictability. "It's hard to say what will happen because we continually surpass our goals. There are many examples of businesses growing at our rate in North America. So we look to them and see what they did... we're on a pretty fast trajectory. It's kind of scary sometimes."

Scary or not, the core owner group has their focus on the future. Expansion, satellite brew pubs, wider distribution — all within their sights. Pick up a can of Central Alberta's best from Blindman Brewing and enjoy the vibe! ●

