

# Kick Back and Relax

## THE Collingwood BREWERY

By John Allaire

Five years ago this summer we actually made the decision to go into business and bought the building in Collingwood," Freeman points out. "And it'll be four years on Victoria Day that we have been in full operation."

Four years may not seem like a long time in the grand scheme of things, but in the fast and ever-expanding craft brewery industry, it's a lifetime. Freeman and his partners jumped in with both feet — a bold decision at the time. "We were quite ambitious with our production facility when we started. We bought the building and sunk a lot of money into it before we even brewed a drop of beer. A lot of people start by contracting their beer production out first, just to get a sales history and get the brand out there before they invest in a facility. So I guess we were what would be considered 'old-school' now. The way the market is now it would seem crazy to do something like that. But it's just the

Sometimes the stars line up. You know, the ones where dreams, passion and feasibility all meet and create a big bang. Such was the case with The Collingwood Brewery. One guy with a passion for making beer, and three other partners with foresight and a willingness to invest in a project.

Owner, co-founder and brewmaster Chris Freeman started brewing beer eight years ago. He was working at an office job and battled the ho-hums by getting into home brewing on evenings and weekends. And like many home brewers, after he made his first batch, his thoughts turned to making a living out of his new-found talent and passion. Not one to let the moss grow under his feet, Freeman and his brother started pounding the pavement in search of financing and interested investors.

In the meantime, Freeman applied to a college brewing course and moved down to the Niagara area for a couple of years to pursue the brewmaster program. While at school, he secured a summer job with the highly successful Creemore Springs Brewery and was hired on full-time after he graduated. All the while, he was in conversations with potential future partners on starting a brewery in Collingwood.

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Freeman about their beginnings, their products, what's down the road for the brewery, and their support community in Collingwood, a small town on Georgian Bay, north of Toronto.

way we started.

Veteran brewers now four years in, and the market is not showing any signs of slowing down or becoming less crowded in Ontario. It is increasingly difficult to secure retail shelf space now in the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO) outlets.

But Freeman focuses on the positive and touts the Collingwood area as becoming one of Ontario's latest beer-lover destinations. "The great thing about Collingwood now is that two other groups have had the same idea. So literally within one month, three breweries opened up in Collingwood. So now we have a great beer culture up here. I'm happy about that. And there are more cideries and breweries opening in the near future. It's great to be a part of the community."

Often, the inspiration behind the types of beer craft breweries develop are driven by popularity and current trends

in the marketplace. But Freeman explains that he took a different approach to developing his flagship beer. He was looking for something that was appealing and less represented by the trends. "Whenever you start making your own beer at home, you realize the potential of what you can do with different recipes. So I started making my own beer, and like most early brewers, it was average to bad. But I was experimenting, so my expectations were in check."

He adds, "Actually, it was my time at Creemore Springs where I really learned about the art of making beer. It's one thing to make a recipe off the cuff and make a really crazy tasting beer — that's a very simple thing to do. The real art in the craft is making a well-balanced beer that you can keep coming back to, and that you can make consistently the same every time."

The now Molson-owned Creemore Springs specialized in very approachable German-style lagers. And that's where



Freeman really grew to appreciate the value of consistency. As he explains, "You can ramp up the hops and other ingredients in certain beers and make them a real punch in the face, and people will say 'wow what a great beer.' But they get through one of them and they have to move on to something else."

With the prospect of opening his own brewery in the near future, Freeman was seriously pondering what kind of beer he wanted to lead with and make his flagship.

"I was looking at the market at the time, six years ago, and there weren't many craft breweries that made an American style pale ale as their flagship brew. As it turned out, by the time we launched, the whole market had turned that way anyway. So our Downhill Pale Ale was actually my final project in college. I had to design and brew a beer for the course, so I decided that I was going to brew the beer that was destined to be my flagship when I started my own brewery. I brewed Downhill at the college and probably brewed it another 10 to 15 times again at home before I finally made it at the brewery a few years later when we opened."

Well, let's call that one a success. Downhill Pale Ale is definitely the kind of beer that you can have four or five of over the course of a hockey game on TV, and not feel that your mouth has been assaulted. In fact, based on what the industry and the current market is churning out for IPAs, it's actually lighter

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in hops without sacrificing the body of the beer.

Freeman mentions that this drinkability was definitely by design. "Yes, we were trying to find that sweet spot where it wasn't too light — there was a nice body going on — and the hops aren't dominating. They are in there with a nice hop character. So that was my real goal, to hit that right balance between all those elements and make it so you can drink a number of them in one sitting. And to this day, Downhill is our number one seller. None of the other brands have out-sold it yet."

Collingwood's other styles available out in the retail outlets are just as approachable as the Downhill. Freeman points out that he lets his own taste buds do the thinking for him. "Honestly, in the end, we make beer that we like to drink ourselves. So when I'm designing a beer, I'm not really thinking of what's popular in the marketplace of the moment. I'm thinking of what am I going to be able to drink a couple of personally, and then I kind of hope the market takes to it."

Collingwood's ESB, or Extra Special Bitter, is a well-balanced English-style pale ale.

"People who try it and possibly don't expect to like it end up loving it. Out of all of our beers, it probably has the most cult-like following. People who love it really love it. But it's not as massively popular as the Downhill," explains

Freeman. And finally, there is the Rockwell Pilsner, Collingwood's third permanent brand. As a familiar pilsner, it is by far their most approachable beer. It was intended to be their big seller, but despite all efforts, choosy Collingwood drinkers have kept it in a close second. "We wanted to get something out there that we thought might overtake Downhill. And the Pilsner is popular on tap, but the Downhill still beats it at the LCBO. It's our lightest at 4.6% — a Czech-style Pilsner."

**"We bought the building and sunk a lot of money into it before we even brewed a drop of beer."**

Bearing in mind that this is a business, after all, and not just a personal brewing adventure, Freeman admits that they are wandering into the IPA world. "It has taken us a few years, and we were a little hesitant to make it because there are so many out there. Also, I wasn't sure I would be doing anything different from the other IPAs out there. So I wanted to design something that was more in line with what I have been doing with the other beers."

He continues, "The result a nice hop aroma, but it's not in-your-face. And admittedly, part of making this one was to balance the business side with my taste preference. IPAs tend to be craft brewers' best sellers and I guess I have resisted for about as long as I can. So we'll be launch-



ing the IPA in the LCBO in May."

Like most craft breweries, community plays a huge role in the success of Collingwood. "Our goal is to be a community brewery. We even bill ourselves as The Collingwood Brewery. So it's really important for us to have ties to all sorts of community groups and support local activities, which we do as much as we can. We are trying to tie that support in with our tap room and give people the opportunity to come and use it for their own activities. Community groups, sports teams, whatever."

Getting the message out to the community is no small feat for the brewery because they are tucked away in an industrial area, a little off the beaten path. However, they often take their activities on the road to spread the good word. Freeman mentions, "There are festivals and a few other types of events that we participate in. And we support lots of charities and community groups through fundraising."

Things like sponsoring a hole on the golf course for charity tournaments, or donating gift baskets or tap room experiences. We help with fundraisers for schools and churches in Collingwood. We are always trying to leverage our space and resources to help people improve the community."

So what's next?

"For us, it's a couple things," Freeman points out. "We did

one expansion almost two years ago where we doubled our production capacity by adding tanks. And hopefully in the next six months we will be further along on our next expansion, which will once again be increasing our capacity by adding more tanks again. An expansion of our packaging facility is also in the works."

Freeman closes off by explaining that distribution diversification is becoming necessary, just by virtue of diminishing shelf space for retailers. "The market is so crowded now that it is getting tough to find shelf space. When we first started, we could call ten LCBOs in a day and eight of them would take us on. Now we hear 'call us back in a month' because space is so limited. So we are trying find other avenues to sell our beer. Recently, we have turned toward the Beer Store. We've launched three full-time brands with them at this point. And we will be rotating the IPA there in June."

**"The real art in the craft is making a well balanced beer that you can keep coming back to."**

That's good news for those of us who love Collingwood's very balanced flavours. As summer slowly approaches in Ontario, you can be sure to see a can of Collingwood sitting on the arm of a Muskoka chair at a lake near you. Look for it at your favourite beer retailer and don't forget to tell them who sent ya! Kick back and relax! ●