



BEER OF THE PEOPLE!

Democracy (def.) - a system of governing by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives; control of an organization or group by the majority of its members; the ability to vote on what flavour and style of beer your local brewery will make next!

The Grain Bin Brewing Company, located in Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada, states right up front that the way consumers are enjoying beer is evolving. Not a fan of the beers available to you at the pub or in the store? No problem. Grain Bin gives their customers an opportunity to log in to their website and vote on how the next batch of their delicious beer will be brewed.

Of course, they have an array of flagship beers that are available year round, but their small- batch DEMOCRACY! series is taking Alberta by storm by offering a customizable batch of beer for special occasions, or just to sample one pint at a time. Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with Grain Bin's owner and Head Brewer Dalen Landis about their unique production programs and the craft brewing scene in Grande Prairie, Alberta.



By John Allaire

It all started back in high school," Landis recalls. "I found home brewing to be a fun hobby. It was a little bit of science, a little bit of art... and you got alcohol at the end!" These early brewing experiences started with store-bought kits. "The beer was terrible," Landis admits. But the inspiration took root and, fast-forward 10 years, with a young family and less time on his hands, Landis joined forces with a number of likeminded friends and bought some home brewing equipment. Sharing expenses and the workload on the labour-intensive brew days worked best for the group.

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The story shifts to the Alberta government's decision to eliminate the 'minimum mandatory volume' regulation for brewers, allowing people to start up a small brewery without having to commit to large volumes of product right out of the gate. "We thought that if we could start up a small hobby brewery that was able to pay for itself, why not take the plunge. So, we decided to start up at a size where we didn't have to go to a bank and get a loan."

The partners incorporated their small business in July of 2015 and, after ploughing through the mountain of paperwork associated with producing alcohol for sale, they moved into a brewing space that October. And on Christmas Eve of that year, with the snow gently falling on Grande Prairie, the Grain Bin Brewing Company brewed their first batch of beer for sale.

Being a low-volume brewery has a number of advantages, mainly in the headache-avoidance department. But a huge benefit is it allows Grain Bin to experiment and produce consumer-driven concoctions like their aforementioned DEMOCRACY! series of small-batch beers. Landis explains, "We have a lot of flexibility and freedom. When we started, we were just brewing the beers that we like to drink. We didn't have to do the safe, commercially-viable options."

Enter the beer of the people! Landis depicts the idea as being about handing some of the controls over to the people, so to speak, rather than making all the decisions themselves. "It's like that guy on a road trip, he's picking all the music. Maybe some of the music is good but it'd be nice if he let the others in the car operate the iPod once in



a while. So, the people who were enjoying our beer already, we thought we'd let them have some input and share their ideas with us."

Grain Bin's DEMOCRACY! series helps them to connect directly with their community. Here's how it works: There are no set-in-stone guidelines or rules. Customers go to the online form on Grain Bin's website, fill it out (for example, people would vote on options such as styles and ingredients like more hops, less malt flavour, hint of citrus, and so on), and basically direct the brewery on what they want in a beer. Then the brewers take a swing at what received the popular vote. Voilà. Your palette at work.

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"A month or two down the road, they can pull a pint and say, 'this is the beer I voted for. This is the president I elected!'" The first winner was a Double IPA. Hardly a surprise, as the craft beer world seems to be going hop-forward-IPA crazy at the moment.

The latest DEMOCRACY! Poll asked enthusiasts to choose their favourite style of hops. The poll acts as a bit of a testament to how educated the craft-beer consumer has become. Knowledge of different hop types probably would have made for very short pub conversation a decade ago. But the recent craft movement in Alberta, and indeed across North America, has led to a new, better educated breed of beer drinker.

And the winner? It was the Sorochi Ace hops. It's a somewhat rare hybrid with an odd character. Chances are, DEMOCRACY! was being tested by the regulars looking to challenge the brewmasters and, simultaneously, ending up with a brew they have never tasted before. More to the point, it demonstrates the premise behind the whole series of mad-scientist concoctions.

The people have spoken!

Carrying this "beer of the people" inclination even further, Grain Bin has initiated what they call their "Community Series" of brews as well. Landis explains, "The way our Community Series works is, we work with local not-for-profit and charity groups in Grande Prairie, and they come in and design a beer with us. They also do the label design. Then we brew the beer and more often than not, it is brewed for a specific event that the organization is putting on. So, we offer this beer to the public and the proceeds we make from that beer get donated back into the charity."

One of these 'Community' beers was for a local institution called the St. Lawrence Centre. It's a drop-in facility that offers a warm place to stay for people who need it, for whatever reason they find themselves without a place to

stay. They focus on being available to people during hours that many shelters are closed or otherwise unavailable.

The beer created for the not-for-profit centre speaks to the tragic story of Saint Lawrence himself. Briefly, he was the Saint who dedicated his life in service to the poor. Defiant to the Roman Emperor for using the church's riches to feed the poor instead of paying taxes, he was eventually burned at the stake. As a homage to the Saint (and with a bit of humour inserted into the creation of the beer, for good measure), the lager they developed had a smokey finish to it, reminiscent of the acrid demise of the Centre's namesake.

All this is not to give the impression that Grain Bin only does one-offs and small-batch charity beers. But because they don't have a tap-house per se, the bulk of their beer gets sold into the wholesale market to bars and restaurants. Landis points out that there are basically two streams of wholesale customers — ones who want the same beer on tap month-after-month, and those who want to try something different with every delivery.

"Yeah, some want something new each time and some want the consistency of the same beer. So we do a pale ale, an amber ale, a Hefeweizen, and a rotational lager which is more seasonal. These are the ones we produce all the time... We also have a handful of beers that we don't produce all the time, but we bring them back a lot. Like our English Special Bitter, a Dunkelweizen, a robust porter and a stout."

The brewery started out a couple of years ago with a three-barrel (3.5 hectolitre) brewery housing just under 30 hectolitres of fermenting space. It only took six months to realize that demand was outstripping their ability to produce at a sufficient rate. They had to double their brewing capacity, while simultaneously adding a bottling line for 650 ml single bottles.

"We were conditionally just doing wholesale. Just selling to bars and restaurants for draft and doing growler fills here. But we had a lot of people telling us they wanted more options on how to purchase our beer. So, we got a bottling line." Still, demand kept pushing Grain Bin's ability to produce enough beer in their current location. So, in October 2017, they moved to an even larger facility. "We moved to a building which was four-times the size. It immediately doubled our production capacity again."

Looking forward, Landis points out that they are going to try and grow with demand, but not push the limits too far. "I guess the sky's the limit. But right now, we're just trying to grow naturally. The money we make generally goes back into the company. So, any growth we have is natural and we can afford any expansions that come down the road."

Landis is also quick to point out that, while the brewery isn't overrun with staff, they do have help from good friends and family who like to hang out and help where they can. "It's a

bit of a scene here. People will help label bottles or push a mop. We're lucky to have the people around here who just like to be part of what's going on."

Grain Bin's focus remains local. Priority is placed on the art of making the best, most unique beer they can, rather than mass production and distribution. "For a small business like ours, even something like shipping to all the corners of Alberta could be cost-prohibitive. So, we are happy to make Grande Prairie and the surrounding communities our priority."

The craft beer landscape is ever-changing. The Grain Bin Brewing Company has found a way to stand out in the crowd. The challenge has been issued. Go on! Have your say! ●



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