

ADVENTURES

TIN



CREATIVE



BEER



Eric Williams woke up on his 40th birthday and decided he'd had enough. Managing a paint sales store was no longer cutting it for him. He wanted change. Big change.

He wanted to operate a business that brought smiles to the faces of employees and customers alike. Eric walked into the kitchen, sat down, and exclaimed to his wife, "Megan, we are going to open a craft brewery in Milford, Delaware!"

Williams was an avid home brewer at the time. But favorable reviews from his friends and family weren't enough to give him the confidence to take an immediate leap into an unfamiliar industry. So he wisely spent two years practicing his recipes, business planning, traveling the country seeking out best practices, and assembling a team of partners. One of these partners was the company's now Chief Operating Officer Ryan Maloney. The two would meet in the evenings, after their jobs were done for the day, and renovate the space they were soon to call their brewery. On November 15, 2013, Mispillion River Brewing opened its doors to the people of Milford.

Their website offers their mission statement: "Mispillion River Brewing aims to be recognized by its customers and the brewing industry for producing the highest quality craft beer. We honor craft brewing by using the highest quality ingredients, and strive for the best customer service in the industry." Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with co-owner Lauren Bigelow about Mispillion River's passion for brewing, their community, and the craft brewery scene in their home state.

By John Allaire

Delaware has followed suit with the rest of North America in that craft breweries and distilleries are opening at an alarming rate. "There are maybe 19 or 20 breweries in Delaware now," Bigelow points out. "And Delaware is a small state. Specifically, down in the beach area, you have a bunch of them within a two-minute drive of each other."

The term "competition" tends to take on a friendlier cooperative vibe between craft brewers than it does in other, more traditionally combative industries. Bigelow explains, "There is definitely more competition here now. And it does keep getting more competitive, because there is a limited amount of shelf space and a limited amount of draft lines."

But here comes the "friendlier" part.

Bigelow laughs, "I'm marrying a brewer from another brewery, so there's definitely collaboration!"

She goes on to describe the tight-knit brewing community as being more like family than cut-throat competitors. "When something doesn't work well for us in any area of our production, Dogfish Head (another brewery in the area) is just a call away. They're always willing to help us, because they went through what we're going through, maybe 20 years ago."

Mispillion River offers many varieties, styles and flavors of beer, and thus find it necessary to source their ingredients from the best suppliers all around the world.

"The thing about hops is, if you put them in a different area to grow them, they'll change based on that soil. So we source from the traditional places where the various hops come from, to maintain that authentic quality. With the grain, we're a little more lenient with the location. We do have a maltster located in Delaware. They just opened and we've used their malt for some of our beers."

The brewery's tasting room has up to 10 beers flowing at any given time, and they bottle a few more for retail outlets. Bigelow explains that Mispillion's best seller changes depending on the point of purchase. "Our best seller? There are two answers to that question. Out in the market, I believe our 'Not Today Satan' 7.3% IPA is the top seller. That one has been in cans for about two years now. And we find that for our packaged products, IPAs sell the best." This is hardly a surprise, as IPAs are by far the current top selling style of craft beer across the continent.

The on-site sales at the brewery paint a different picture. Bigelow says, "In our tasting room, on the other hand, our sours tend to be our best sellers. We make them very well. And it seems that our general tasting room customer is more adventurous than the typical market customer."

The creative adventures continue back in the produc-

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tion area of the brewery where small-batch experiments are being developed on a regular basis. In fact, the ideas behind the experimental brews can come from just about anywhere. "Sometimes, one of us will be eating something and think 'I wonder what this would taste like in a beer?' Then we just go talk to the brewer and he figures it out."

Food seems to be a running theme with their experimental mixtures. "We like to eat! So that's where a lot of the inspiration for our beers come from. But sometimes we just like to see what we can do. For example, one of the beers we are releasing next month is our most hops-per-barrel beer ever. We just want to see how much hops we could put in a beer and not be overpoweringly bitter. We did eight pounds of hops per barrel."

Has your tongue curled up into a frightened ball in the back of your mouth yet? Not to worry. The brewers at Mispillion River have the answer.

"We source from the traditional places where the various hops come from, to maintain that authentic quality."

"Here's the thing," Bigelow explains. "We used Vermont Ale Yeast for that beer. And the way Vermont Ale Yeast works is it generally tones down bitterness in a beer. It makes it very juicy. So, the beer is not very bitter at all. You actually get more flavor from the hops than you do the bitterness from them."

If that isn't unique enough for you, Mispillion River Brewing is quite famous for their "Golden Stout." It's not your average heavy tar-colored traditional stout. In fact, many first-timers assume it is being sold in the wrong category when they raise their pint and the golden color catches the light. "It is the color of a Budweiser, and it tastes like chocolate, coffee and has the texture and feel of a milkshake. It is the weirdest, mind-boggling beer you will ever try. So that's one of those experiments that we've become known for."

But wait! There's more! Want a beer you can dump over the head of the Super-Bowl-winning coach on the sidelines? Or perhaps sip slowly while you're peddling away on the stationary bicycle at the gym? Your electrolytes will thank you for this next experimental brew. "Yeah. We made a sour beer with Gatorade. We used the blue Gatorade and made a sour beer out of it. It's one of my all-time favorite beers... I would drink it and go for a run. It's amazing!"

Hmmm. A new target consumer group for marketing purposes? Bigelow laughs, "Actually, the gym down the street did start sending people our way when they heard about the beer."

Reining the conversation back to more traditional brewery matters, she points out that future expansion will come in



expanding but that won't be happening as quickly."

Speaking with Lauren Bigelow, one gets the impression that Eric Williams' original dream to operate a fun place to work is coming true. It would certainly appear that smiles, laughter and a sense of family are an important production ingredient at Mispillion River as hops and malts. Bigelow confirms, "Fun is very important to us."

It's difficult for us to separate the work from the rest of our lives because we are all together constantly. We are all best friends. We all do everything together."

While not unique to the brewing industry, this notion of living a lifestyle that blurs the lines between work and play would certainly

apply to the staff and customers at the brewery. "It is very much a lifestyle. Our spouses are included in it, and we eat, drink, breathe and sleep the craft beer industry... we have a lot of fun, sometimes to the detriment of the business! We're very easily distracted!"

"Anytime there is something going on in the community that we can help with, we do."

Distracted or not, Mispillion River has a strong relationship with their community.

Their benevolence affords them a leadership role within the community and, in fact, allows them to foster real change in the lives of their neighbors. "We quickly realized that we had the opportunity to be leaders, make changes and be an asset to the community because people are so willing to come to a brewery. We do an annual fundraiser every year for the family of a State Trooper who was killed in the line of duty in 2009. In the past two years, we've raised around \$50,000 for them. Anytime there is something going on in the community that we can help with, we do."

The creative and community-minded energy that surrounds Mispillion River Brewing is demonstrated in everything they do, right down to their lively and animated website. Next time you are passing through Milford, Delaware, pop into the tasting room and soak it all in. The adventures never end! ●

the form of entering into the restaurant industry.

"We are currently in the process of building a brew pub, so that will be happening in the next year. That's where we see expansion making sense. Production-wise, we will be