

The Spirit of the North



There is no shortage of tales about wayfarers heading up to Canada's north, looking for a new life adventure. And with nearby diamond and precious metal mining, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories sees its fair share of new faces. The locals will tell you that people come and go, but there are a few constants — it's very cold much of the year, the Aurora Borealis is stunning, and the inhabitants of Canada's north enjoy a good brew. Fletcher Stevens has lived in Yellowknife his entire adult life, building a career as a mechanic for a major car company. He and his wife Miranda were looking to beat the high cost of beer in the Northwest Territories by trying their hand at home brewing. However, this hedge against liquor taxes turned into a full-time career in brewing.

The NWT Brewing Co. is the northern most brewery in Canada. They combine Canadian-grown grains with the purest water in the world to create their unique beers, infused with the "can-do, make-do" spirit of the North. Spotlight on Business spoke with Fletcher Stevens about how the NWT Brewing Co. came about, and the challenges of brewing in Canada's remote north.

By John Allaire

Home brewing sparked an interest, and the interest sparked an obsession. Then before you knew it, I was manufacturing my own components and building jimmy-rigged brewhouses." From there, Fletcher decided to brew the beer to be served at his own wedding reception, and his concoctions received rave reviews from the guests. It was all the boost he needed. That seed of confidence in his brewing capabilities grew until he was finally faced with a choice. Stay on as a mechanic, with a steady income and opportunity for advancement within a larger corporate structure, or walk away and pursue what had now become a full-on obsession.

His wife Miranda was, herself, interested in the hospitality industry, but more from the culinary side. Her dream was to run a small café and create unique entrées out of the kitchen. Combining a great



kitchen with a top-notch brewhouse seemed to be the logical answer. But Fletcher still needed to pass a more vigorous acid test before taking the plunge out of his financially secure position in the automotive industry. His beer was getting rave reviews from his friends and family, but he needed a little more objectivity before diving in head first.

“Nobody was really drinking craft beer here until we started brewing it.”

Canada-wide home-brew competitions were the answer. So in late 2012, he began bringing his beers to Calgary, Winnipeg and other surrounding urban centres and entering into their home-brew competitions. Stacking his beers up against other obsessive amateur brewmasters was the only way to see where he stood as a brewer. He walked away from his first competition with some advice, useful critiques on his beer, and a little knowledge on how to categorize his brews... but no hardware.

Not to be discouraged, he applied the knowledge he gained from his first competition and won medals in all of the following competitions for the recipes he uses in his brew pub today.

The last time a brew pub opened in Yellowknife was some 20 years earlier, but had failed to really establish itself in the community. Fletcher and Miranda saw their new-found talents as an opportunity to take advantage of a gap in the marketplace and fulfill dreams of owning their own brew pub. It was time to take the leap with both feet. In January 2014, Fletcher quit his full-time job in the auto industry and became a brewmaster.



MARITIME
Labels AND Packaging
Expect More!

ATLANTIC CANADA'S PREMIER
LABEL PRINTER FOR
CRAFT BEER, CIDER, WINE AND SPIRITS.



High quality, full color
Wide variety of substrates & finishes
Stock and custom shapes & sizes
Design services available

www.GoMLP.ca

beth@goMLP.ca • Toll Free: 1.855.835.2400
100 Bluewater Road, Bedford, NS B4B 1G7

The first roadblock was quick to rear its head. Amidst building the brew pub, they realized that Territorial Government legislation was creating administrative road blocks and hurdles. "The liquor laws up here are sensitive areas to deal with. There are lots of social issues surrounding liquor and dry communities in the areas around the bar. So the Territorial Government is very protective about it's liquor legislation... We actually had to convince them that we weren't a distillery. And we also had to convince the municipal government that our equipment wasn't going to explode! We had to educate them on the whole process."

Fletcher and Miranda's efforts actually did get legislation changed. And not in any insignificant way either. "We used to have the highest liquor tax in Canada. It was \$2.22/litre flat rate. So we had to pretty much re-write legislation. But before we received confirmation that tax legislation would be changed, we had already taken the plunge with both feet. So we were just riding on the hope that people would continue to fight for us and bring the tax rates down. And also to allow us to sell our growlers directly to customers, rather than having to go through a liquor warehouse."

It was a stressful time in the Stevens' household. They were overseeing the building and Renovation of a brew pub, without actually knowing if legislation would allow them to operate in a way that would make it an economically feasible venture.

Trailblazing can be thankless and frustrating work, as they were finding out. Even the liquor licensing process had twisted aspects to it that were unique to their remote location. "It was a cart-before-the-horse situation. We had to build the brewery, we had to be able to produce beer that could be sent out and tested before they would give us a license. But in order to brew beer, we needed to have a license. So as we were soaking all this money into the brew pub, we didn't even know if we were going to be awarded a license to manufacture beer."

"Eliminate, automate and delegate."

It was a testament to their patience and tenacity that the Stevens made it through the hoops and eventually were awarded their license. Nevertheless, the problems didn't end there. When they finally opened their doors to the public, they were serving guest beer rather than their own craft beer because their American-made brewing equipment didn't pass Canadian certification standards. But at this point, NWT Brewing Co. had to make money. The financial reserves were running dry and the doors had to swing open for business as a matter of mere survival. The good news is that they did survive, and in an act of defiance, they brewed an anniversary red beer and called it "Evil Red Tape Ale."

Fletcher explains that the bar and restaurant scene in Yellowknife is actually experiencing a modest upswing. "The





Here's to a
dandy Brew System
... where there's no compromise.



With more than 20 years in the brewing industry, DME Brewing Solutions stands the test of time. Contact us today for all your brewing equipment needs from individual tanks to full brewing systems and everything in between. We make gear that's built to order and built to last.

DMEBREWING.COM (902) 628-6900
SALES@DMEBREWING.COM



appeal base. "Currently we have twelve beers on tap. When we opened, we started with three beers, and bumped it up to four right away. We focused on more approachable recipes, like our Belgian style Turbid Wit... by the time we brewed the Ragged Pine Pale Ale, my wife fought to have the recipe changed because she said a lot of people who tried it thought it was too bitter... at the time we opened, this one was a real palette shock for many people."

One of the charming features of the craft beer movement is the nomenclature. The creative names for the unique concoctions tend to reflect the environment in which they were brewed. In NWT's case, they have the "bug series" of beers. Leading the swarm is their "Bug Repellent IPA." Considered to be their flagship beer, this brew is unabashedly all about the hops. The website boasts that it goes great with spice, cheese and mosquitoes! At the other end of the spectrum, they have their "Bug Light." It's a Session Ale, lower in alcohol and approachable with a citrus finish. All-in-all, with twelve beers on tap, even the staunchest of 'big beer' drinkers can find something that will appeal their palette.



"We used to have the highest liquor tax in Canada. So we had to pretty much re-write legislation."

diamond mines being such a big industry up here, that has given the scene a bit of a push. And the Aurora Borealis. Yellowknife is the best place in the world to view the Northern Lights. We are seeing thousands and thousands of tourists, many from Asia, and the Pacific, all this tourism has really helped out the hospitality industry."

Turning to NWT's beer, Fletcher points out that converting the locals to accepting craft beer as an alternative to macro-brewed big-name beer continues to be an ongoing process. "Nobody was really drinking craft beer here until we started brewing it. So when we opened with just craft beer on tap, a lot of people had their doubts... But it created that niche."

While the curious were starting to give NWT's offerings a try, Fletcher points out that, as a prudent business move, he began by brewing styles of beer that would have a wider

Despite the challenges associated with brewing beer in a remote northern community, Fletcher is nothing but positive about the future. "Yellowknife is currently doing a pretty good job of drinking us out of what we produce in the pub.

We are starting to get our products into other bars and restaurants in town... And we have hopes to move major brewing operations to a warehouse space and be more of a distribution-type brewery. That was kind of the goal right off the bat.

Start with a brew pub first. The restaurant is important because it has money coming in every day. If we were just a brewery, there would be times in the cycle where we would have money going out, but not coming in. So the restaurant



Choose a partner the brewing industry trusts to provide all of their keg needs...

The Global Standard for Quality

- Standard Canadian and US keg sizes
- Innovative design and manufacturing processes
- The only keg manufacturer in North America with keg service, repair and rebranding facilities

Kwik Kegs

- Embossing and silk screen logo printing available for all sizes and quantities with fast turnarounds.



CANADA KEGS & PACKAGING

Steve Mason, Canada Kegs & Packaging

Phone: 905.802.2337, Email: steve@canadakegs.com



is an important piece of the plan."

Talking to Fletcher, you can sense his pride in the food and craft beer movement that is gaining steam in Yellowknife. He speaks of sustainability for his business in a way demonstrates

its importance to people who live in remote communities and have a true connection with their land. "With us at the top of Canada, we really have to get creative in remaining committed to sustainability... we are on trucked-in water and trucked-out sewage, so there are these constant challenges."



The ideas and possibilities seem as vast as the land they inhabit. "Every year, my wife and I come up with a New Year's resolution that get us a little further. This year it was 'Eliminate, Automate and Delegate.' Our favourite saying when people ask how we accomplish all we do is it's like a duck on water... looks calm on the surface but underneath, we're treading water like crazy!"

Treading water or not, the NWT Brewing Co. is swiftly becoming the pride of Canada's north. ●

