



PINT PAUCITY NO MORE

Yellowknife readies for its own brew pub | by Alex Power | photos by Pat Kane

Right before moving to Yellowknife I traded my air conditioner for a 25 kg sack of malted barley. If you didn't already know, this is the primary ingredient for making beer. While Yellowknife might be some kilometres shy of the Barrenlands, it's still a craft beer desert. So, while I wouldn't be needing an air conditioner anymore, I would definitely be needing more beer-making supplies.

Elsewhere in Canada, the craft brewing industry is in the midst of a boom. Small breweries producing high quality beer are opening faster than ever before. In 2009, Statistics Canada reported 209 breweries in Canada, and that number is growing. What's more, these small-scale brewers are capturing more market share from large national beer brands, as beer drinkers' pallets shift away from mass-produced factory beer towards the more complex offerings of craft brewers. It was against this backdrop that I realized I'd be moving to a territory with neither a brewery nor brew-pub. But that's about to change.

A Yellowknife couple is taking the city's pint paucity to heart. Fletcher and Miranda Stevens are preparing to open a new brew-pub in Old Town, marking the second time this has been tried. Legend has it that back in the early '90s Yellowknife had its own Arctic Brewing Company. Notwithstanding the geographic inaccuracies of its name and reports of mediocre beer, it was wildly popular, drawing scores of parched Yellowknifers to the deck of the old Canadian Pacific Airlines building overlooking Back Bay. The Stevens hope their brew-pub will be just as popular – but with better beer and more staying power.

Like many, Fletcher started homebrewing to offset the cost of beer. When Miranda agreed to move to Yellowknife with him in 2009 she was stunned by the exorbitant cost of beer, and told him he'd better start making some, and fast.

After getting some beginner's advice from Miranda's brother Devin, himself a long-time homebrewer, Fletcher bought a homebrew kit. So began the odyssey. Fletcher

and Miranda described his few batches as “drinkable,” but they got better. This progress hit a few bumps along the way; like the time he flooded the backyard and nearly lit the house on fire while trying out his newly upgraded brewing system.

Then one day Fletcher brought Miranda a glass of his most recent brew. After a few tastes, Miranda said, “This is good, where’d you get it?” This marked a turning point.

Three years later the back room of their house and the shed in the yard have been seconded to the beer-making effort. Carboys full of fermenting beer, laboratory equipment for growing yeast, an electric control panel, brewing kettles, pumps, silicon tubing and kegs. Lots of kegs. This is a house for making beer. Good beer.

But why a full blown brew-pub? As a homebrewer, I’ve know many people with borderline out-of-control brewing tendencies who’ve never taken the final leap into commercial brewing. When I asked the couple this question, Fletcher joked that opening a brew-pub was his way of keeping Miranda from leaving Yellowknife.

“I’ve always wanted to own a restaurant,” says Miranda, “and we really feel like there’s a market for this sort of pub in Yellowknife.” As an admittedly biased, craft beer lover, this author has to agree.

Currently, there is no liquor-primary establishment in Yellowknife showcasing an extensive beer list, let alone an emphasis on craft breweries. Even beer from the Whitehorse based Yukon Brewing Company is hard to come by. So much for territorial solidarity.

Fletcher and Miranda have selected an Old Town building at 3901 Franklin Ave., as the location for the brew-pub. Immediately north of Haks Auto body, the wedge shaped site sits behind the mural of Yellowknife Bay. The building

is currently being renovated and the couple plan to move equipment in as soon as it’s ready.

“We initially wanted to be in there by March,” says Miranda, “but it’s taking a bit longer, so we’re using the extra time to keep working on our plan.”

The couple have big plans for the brewery, and see no reason to confine their product to the North. “We already have two bars in the south that are willing to carry our beer once we’re up and running,” Fletcher says.

Sending their product south will represent a significant departure from the traditional economics of beer in the Northwest Territories. As it stands, all of our beer is brought in from outside the territory. Perhaps nothing better illustrates our longstanding dependence on southern beer than the annual Beer Barge Bash. What other city celebrates a historic dependence on beer shipped over long distances? If there were such a thing as a beer trade-deficit (and maybe there should be) we would be running one. Fictional economic indicators aside, I feel a new locally owned business meeting local demand can only be good for the city.

The proof, however, is in the pudding. Just because someone wants to open a brew-pub doesn’t mean the beer will be any good. For the sake of the community, I took it upon myself to try some of Fletcher’s most recent homebrew creations. So, under the auspices of writing a magazine article, I managed to sample both the India Pale Ale (IPA to those in the know) and the coffee porter. The IPA had a clean hoppy flavour and aroma while the coffee porter had just the right amount of sweet and roasted flavours. Suffice it to say, without turning this into a beer review, that the quality and drinkability of the beer was reflected in the circuitous path I walked home that night. With a bit of luck I hope to be tracing similar paths home from Old Town’s newest brew pub this summer. ☺

Alex Power is a genetic engineer turned freelance writer. When not brewing beer in his kitchen, he’s usually brewing coffee.



“Like many, Fletcher started homebrewing to offset the cost of beer.”

Miranda and Fletcher Stevens are moving their beer-making operations into a new brew pub in Old Town