



The return of the neighborhood brewery



Brew pubs are really quite the hottest thing these days. Existing restaurants are sprouting stainless steel tanks with all their related equipment and new restaurants seemingly can't be built without them. Don't get us wrong, we were born and raised in Wisconsin and consider beer an essential element of life. All the brew pubs turn out some truly amazing beers. However, this article celebrates those brave souls who don't hedge their bets with a restaurant and a full menu but commit solely to crafting beers of distinction. Every beer drinker in the state knows the names Sprecher, Point, Capital, and Leinenkugel. They are the state's big little brewers. But if you visit a local liquor store, you'll find that Wisconsin also hosts an array of microbreweries whose names may not be as familiar. They are brewers who



work in small batches and distribute on a local basis. The owners are hands-on, often serving as brew master as well as president, sales manager, marketing manager, tour guide, and delivery driver.

Microbreweries are nothing new to Wisconsin. By the late 1800s just about every community had one.

Some communities exist because they grew up around a brewery. They were a vital part of their community providing a number of steady jobs, buying grain from local farmers who in turn often fed brewery by-products to their livestock. The breweries sponsored community events, youth groups, and sports teams. Today's small breweries serve many of the same functions in their communities.

We had a chance to talk to six of these craft brewers who came highly recommended by local experts:



Lake Louie Brewing

Lake Louie started in 2000 just outside Arena, Wisconsin. “We brew under two thousand barrels,” explains owner Tom Porter. “We’re self-distributing so we’re pretty much a brewery to Madison. We’ve done barrels of beer for the bars from the get-go. Then we started selling growlers. Later we went into nonreturnable bottles and our sales tripled.” Lake Louie offers Warped Speed Scotch Ale, Milk Stout (an unfiltered English stout made with lactose to give it a sweet rich flavor), and



A small brewery knows it’s reached the big time when they move from barrels and growlers to bottles.

Tommy’s Porter as well as at least seven others (sometimes they just brew up a new beer for the heck of it). You can take tours on Saturdays by appointment.

Lakefront Brewery

Lakefront Brewery arose out of two brothers’ friendly competition making home brew. Russ and Jim Klisch sold their first barrel of beer in 1987. Today they’re turning out around 10,000 barrels annually. They produce 22 different beers (and a great maple root beer) including 12 ales, 10 lagers, and 7 seasonal brews. They also offer New Grist, a one-of-a-kind gluten-free beer brewed without wheat or barley that was a gold medal winner at The Great American Brew Fest in 2006. “We’re trying to revive the hop-growing industry in Wisconsin,” says Orlando Segura of Lakefront Brewery. “We’re seriously thinking about producing a beer where all the ingredients come from Wisconsin. That would be a first.” There’s a charge for their tour but you get a souvenir pint glass. The Friday tour costs a little more but includes a fish fry.



Tanks at Lakefront Brewery—it never hurts to have a sense of humor on the job. Above: The bottling line turning out Lakefront’s award-winning New Grist.

Viking Brewing Company

Dallas, Wisconsin, is the home of Viking Brewing Company, started in 1994 by Randy and Ann Lee. “We brew 300 to 400 barrels a year—we’re really small,” says Ann. “We’re artists. We research each type of beer extensively before we come out with it. We figure out what the essence of each beer was to make it as close as possible to the original recipe.” Viking offers 23 different beers, all are unpasteurized with no added chemicals and include Vienna Woods Venetian

Bountiful Cupboard



Lager, Whole Stein, a coffee oatmeal they call their breakfast beer, Milk Porter, JS Bock, Abby Normal, a Tripel Abby-style ale, Big Swede Imperial Stout, and many others with less imaginative names but the same great quality. Viking Brewing offers tours on Saturdays (unless they're attending a beer show) or tours may be arranged by appointment.

Cross Plains Brewery

In 1863, George Esser came to Cross Plains. "He bought some land and decided to build a brewery. Another family bought land at the other end of town and decided to build a brewery, too. It became a race to see who got their basement in first. George won. The other family moved up to Chippewa Falls," explained Wayne Esser. That other family was named Leinenkugel. George, his sons, and grandsons brewed until the Depression. After the Depression, they transitioned into being a distributor and gave up brewing. There they stayed until 1995, when Wayne and Larry Esser, the sixth generation in the business, started brewing beer again using George's original recipe. Cross Plains Brewery now produces two beers: the original Esser's Best, a German-style lager, and Esser's Cross Plains Special. "Esser's Best will give you a taste of the type of beer your forefathers downed at their favorite tavern. It goes real well with food," says Wayne. "German tourists often say this tastes like the beer at home. The Cross Plains Special is a medium-bodied pilsner that appeals to those who prefer a more modern style of beer."



Central Waters Brewing Company

Central Waters was founded in 1998 in a historic building in Junction City, Wisconsin. "The brewery started with used dairy equipment that we converted," explains Paul Graham, president. "It was an overglorified home brew system, what people in the industry call franken-breweries." From humble beginnings, the brewery has expanded its offerings, and in January 2007 it moved into a new facility in Amherst to meet increased demand. Central Waters brews about 3,000 barrels a year including



An early 1900s advertisement for Esser's Best

18 beer styles. Some of the more intriguing are Parkin's Pils (named after the original owners of the building), Loch Ness Scotch Ale, Mudd Puppy Porter (their best-selling beer), and Ouisconsin Red Ale.



Ale Asylum

Ale Asylum is a hybrid. They're primarily a brewery but they also operate a small attached brew pub. Ale Asylum is a relative newcomer that has quickly made an impression and developed a loyal following. "We believe in the four-pint test," says Otto Dilba, owner of Ale Asylum. "We

don't produce any beers where you wouldn't want to have a fourth after you've had a third; something good and clean and enjoyable." Their brews include Ambergeddon Amber Ale, Gold Digger Blonde Ale, Hopalicious American Pale Ale, Contorter Porter, Madtown Nut Brown Ale, Big Slick Stout, and a range of seasonal beers and Belgian ales. Tours are Saturdays at 5 P.M. Otherwise you can stop in anytime, eat lunch or dinner, and watch them brew while you eat.

At one time every community of any size had a local brewery. Lack of refrigeration and difficulty of distribution made that a necessity. In today's world it's not necessary, but local breweries like these make it a delight to test and try the wide variety of craft brews now available. From the brew pubs to the local brewers to national and international options: It's a rich beer world out there. Go explore it.



Ale Asylum brews world-class beers using the best equipment to ensure the quality their loyal fans expect.

• IF YOU GO •

For one-stop shopping for the beers mentioned in this article and many more, pay a visit to:

Steve's Wine Market

3618 University Avenue
Madison, WI 53705
(608) 233-6193
www.steveswinemarkets.com

Steve's Liquor & More

8302 Mineral Point Road
(At Junction Road)
Madison, WI 53719
(608) 833-5995
www.steveswinemarkets.com

VISIT THE BREWERIES

Lake Louie Brewing

7556 Pine Road
Arena, WI 53503
(608) 753-2675
www.lakelouie.com

Lakefront Brewery

1872 N. Commerce Street
Milwaukee, WI 53212
(414) 372-8800
www.lakefrontbrewery.com

Viking Brewing Company

P.O. Box #277
Dallas, WI 54733
(715) 837-1824
www.vikingbrewing.com

Cross Plains Brewery

2109 Hickory Street
Cross Plains, WI 53528
(608) 798-3911
www.essersbest.com

Central Waters Brewing Company

351 Allen Street
Amherst, WI 54406
(715) 824-2739
www.centralwaters.com

Ale Asylum

3698 Kinsman Boulevard
Madison, WI 53701
(608) 663-3926
www.aleasylum.com