

The Last Maui Brewer

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KAHANA

Brew pubs come on Maui, and brew pubs go. Go, mostly, except Maui Brewing Co., originally Fish & Game Rotisserie, the only surviving brewer in the county.

Under new owners (and newlyweds) Garrett and Melanie Marrero, Maui Brewing is expanding in several directions and soon will begin canning its craft brews.

Garrett Marrero and brewmaster Tom Kerns came back from the Great American Beer Festival in Denver earlier this month with two silver medals, won in stiff competition and blind taste tests against hundreds of other brewers.

“There are a lot of reasons” that Maui Brewing Co. has survived when others did not, says Kerns, who has been with the restaurant since Tommy LaCloche opened it in 1994. (He was not on Maui the whole time, taking a year off, for example, to start a brewery in Manila.)

One reason was a simple one: Maui Brewing Co.’s location in Kahana Gateway is less expensive than some places others tried.

Stand-alone specialty brewers have not succeeded at all on Maui, and Marrero says brew pubs have an advantage over them, because brew pubs have an opportunity to develop several income streams: food, on-premises beer sales, off-premises draft sales (“growlers”) and retail six-packs.

Of course, the beer has to be good, and Kerns says some of the other local brewers produced admirable beer. But they still failed.

Success also depends on customers who know and feel strongly about beer. They include Marrero, a former investment banker.

He says he stepped off the plane, looked up at Haleakala and knew this was where he was meant to stay. Once relocated from California, he was looking for something to do and the chance to buy Fish & Game “fell into my lap.”

“I hate the fact that we even serve Bud Light,” says Marrero, who attributes the national explosion of craft brewing to an increased sophistication on the part of consumers of food and drink.

Americans are used to light lagers and drink millions and millions of barrels of them, all similar in flavor and texture.

Craft brews, on the other hand, are sold in tiny amounts and have robust, often exotic flavors.

Maui Brewing has two seven-barrel fermenters and a 14-gallon finishing tank, so Kerns cannot make more than 434 gallons at a time.

But by starting a new batch every few days, he produces as many as 15 or 16 kinds a year, including seasonal brews.

The current list includes Belgian Wheat, Dunkel Weizen, Octoberfest Lager, Big Swell India Pale Ale, Hemp Man Brown, Mai Bock, Primo Pilsner, Dark Knight Lager, Barracuda Bitter, Wild Hog Stout, Bikini Blonde Lager, Maui Pale Ale, Maui Hefe Weizen, Penguin XX Imperial Stout, Red Cock Doppel-Bock, and the two medal winners, Honolua Lager and Belgian Abbey Ale.

Ingredients such as malt, barley and hops come from Europe or the Mainland, but all the beer making is done by hand here.

That qualifies it as made on Maui, and Maui Brewing belongs to the Maui Chamber of Commerce Made in Maui Committee.

The water is local, and so is the lilikoi puree (from the Big Island) used in its Tropic Ale.

“We pay a large premium to produce the product on Maui,” says Kerns, “but we will not ever be untrue to ourselves. We will be made in Maui.”

More than one brewer in Hawaii has started making their beers here but soon transferred the brewing to the Mainland.

Island brewers also have to decide whether to bottle their product or sell it on draft.

(Unless the brewer has his or her own pub, selling on draft faces a serious hurdle: Most saloons have a limited number of taps, often just six, and these are devoted to mass market beers and their light versions.)

The original Maui Liquor Commission brew-pub regulations (based on state law) restricted off-premises sales, but lobbying by the Fish & Game helped get that changed.

Marrero credits state Sen. Roz Baker, who represents West and South Maui, for help with that.

Now Maui Brewing – the name change is still in transition, since the Marreros bought the business in January – is planning to sell its beer in numerous ways: on tap in the restaurant, in six-packs, in growlers (refillable half-gallon jugs) and by arrangement with selected restaurants.

The canning equipment will be installed soon, where restaurant customers can watch it in operation.

Cans were chosen over bottles because the cans can be made in Honolulu.

Marrero says the excise tax on imported empty bottles made bottling uneconomical.

In September, Marrero and Kerns hand bottled samples of six of their beers and shipped them (“very carefully, with lots of gel packs”) to Colorado for the 24th annual Great American Beer Festival.

Beers were entered in 69 categories. Kerns was one of more than 100 judges.

Marrero says beer actually has more variety than wine, and his personal preferences are for sweet beers.

One of his favorite desserts is the Wild Hog float – a stout with a scoop of ice cream, “any flavor.”

Not for everybody, he admits, but sophisticated beer drinkers have to be prepared to be adventurous.

Marrero and Kerns describe their award-winning Belgian Abbey Ale as an amber ale with a unique plum and cherry flavor imparted from a special yeast imported from Belgium.

Their medal-winning Honolua Lager is an aged beer in the German “Helles” style, which they describe as “crisp yet

soft that ends with a wondrous maltlike finish.”

For more information, go online to: www.mauibrewingco.com or www.beertown.org.

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