

Beer Quest

Or What I Learned About Homebrewing in Central PA

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There must be something in the water around here, because Central Pennsylvanians love to make beer. Even William Penn built a brew house on his property back when he moved into the neighborhood. These days, it seems like a new local craft brewery is opening up every few months which, if you love beer, is something to get excited about.

As someone with no experience with the process of making beer – but plenty of experience knocking back enough local brews to know Central PA has pretty much nailed it – I decided it was time to go on a quest. A quest to find out if truly anyone – even me – can make beer.

Get Smart

First, I needed to learn how to homebrew. In this day and age, there are almost too many ways to get started. Ryan Johnstonbaugh, head brewer at Crystal Ball Brewing Company in York, recommends Charlie Papazian's book *The Joy of Home Brewing* or John Palmer's *How to Brew*. Also, Homebrewtalk.com is a great online forum where folks can learn, share and find recipes. Of course, the best way to get smart is by visiting your local homebrewing store. There, you'll find the right equipment, supplies, and, most importantly – advice.

Ryan DeLutis, brewmaster at Vineyard and Brewery at Hershey since 2013, recommends Scotzin Bros. in Lemoyne. They're one of the biggest brewery and wine-making supply stores in the state and have been in business for nearly 40 years.

Christian Quinlivan of Liquid Hero Brewery in York recalls walking into homebrew supplier Mr. Steve's and declaring, "I'm tired of drinking awful beer. How do I make good beer?" At which point the owner spent the next two hours talking shop and setting the young brewer on his path to success.

The store has since closed, but Bailee's Homebrew & Wine Supplies currently serves the York area and General Manager Vince Zanghi will bring you up to speed at their new Market Street location.

Greg Snader of Lancaster Homebrew is a perfect example of how important your local homebrew supplier is. For one thing, he knows a lot of the area's pro brewers and has a ton of firsthand experience brewing and teaching classes.

"Actually making your own brew and working with the ingredients is a great way to get behind the scenes and really familiarize yourself with the bones of what makes beer, beer," says Snader.

The Right Stuff

When it comes to what you'll need to get started, you've got options. Typically, a starter kit can range from \$30 for a one-time use small-batch kit to \$200 for a deluxe starter kit and accessories. Then there are some folks who go all out with their multiple kegerators and \$4,000 propane barrel brewing systems.

Or you can get creative like the guys at Liquid Hero did and start out with a turkey fryer and MacGyver some borrowed equipment into a functioning rig.

Both DeLutis and Johnstonbaugh say that one of the biggest challenges transitioning to professional scale brewing was going from making 13-gallon batches at home to making 300+ gallon batches to keep up with demand. DeLutis says it took him 20 to 30 batches until he got comfortable with the big rig at the Brewery at Hershey. And this comes after at least seven years of brewing on his home system.

"It's not a linear scale with the ingredients as a lot of people would assume," explains Johnstonbaugh. "You don't have the luxury of saying, 'I think that I will brew a 10 barrel batch of an English style double IPA chocolate peanut butter strawberry sundae stout lager today.' It doesn't work that way."

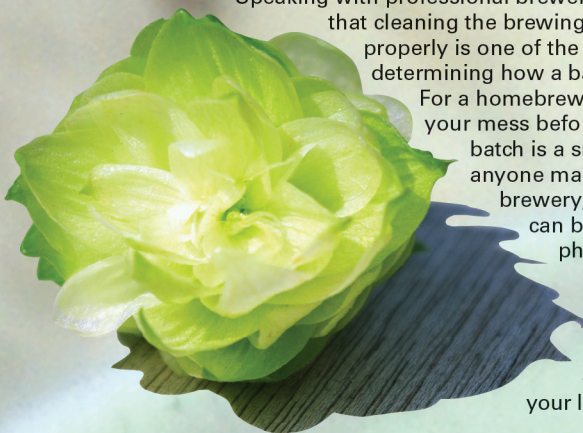
Keep it Clean

When it came to finding out if I could make beer, the short answer was yes. Anyone can. However, making good beer is a matter of practice. With the help of my friend and homebrew hobbyist Zach Zawisa, who got his start from an introductory class at Lancaster Homebrew a year ago, I observed how the process works. We started by sanitizing the equipment.

Speaking with professional brewers, I learned that cleaning the brewing equipment properly is one of the biggest factors in determining how a batch will turn out.

For a homebrewer, cleaning up your mess before and after each batch is a small trade-off. For anyone maintaining their own brewery, cleaning a rig can be an exhausting, physical, dirty job.

"Eighty percent of the job is cleaning things better than you have ever cleaned anything in your life," says DeLutis.



For the Love of Beer

For anyone with aspirations of going pro, keep in mind that large-scale brewing can be dangerous. There are a lot of things that can go wrong if you aren't paying attention – like getting sent to the local burn unit and having your bottles explode in storage. If you're considering getting into the brewpub business, another challenge can be in making sense of the rules and regulations of the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board.

Quinlivan explains, "We have, like, eight licenses and permits to do what we're doing in here."

Which, from my visit, consisted of brewing and canning beer from an immaculately cleaned rig in the back and dispensing it in a cozy little pub at the front, with options for ordering take-out from local restaurants.

"After about year three, you're going to see where you're going to go," says Quinlivan. "The first three years, you're hustling, you're making things work," he says. "But it's for the love of beer. Honest to God. That's really what it's about. We make it because we love it."



LEMON PEEL, BASIL AND BELGIAN YEAST ARE AMONG THE INGREDIENTS BOILED INTO ZACH ZAWISA'S BELGIAN WITBIER.

Taste Test

In my quest to find out about homebrewing, I learned that the community of brewers is probably the friendliest, if not busiest, bunch of people you'll ever meet. I got to witness this firsthand at the 3rd Annual Liquid Hero Homebrew Contest in September.

So how did the strawberry wheat beer (made with locally picked strawberries) that my friend Zach and I worked on turn out? Well, I tasted it a few times and deem it highly drinkable. The berries gave it a nice reddish brown color and a fruity finish without being too sweet. Unfortunately, it didn't place at the Liquid Hero Homebrew Contest. But that's ok.

Recently, I observed while Zach brewed a Belgian Witbier flavored with honey, lemon peel and basil fresh from the garden. He even threw in some homegrown hops right off the vine. Our only mishap was dropping a screwdriver into the batch while adjusting the wort chiller, but we quickly fished it out of there with some tongs. As I write this it's still fermenting, so I'm interested to see if we get a hint of screwdriver in our finished product.

An event to look forward to is the Homebrew Harvest Festival on October 11 at the Vineyard and Brewery at Hershey. There, you'll get to meet some great folks and sample some excellent local brews.

And since we're in the throes of another seasonally spiced beer season, I'll leave you with these words of wisdom from brewmaster DeLutis: "Keep the pumpkin beers in the holster until you put the shorts away."

FLY PHOTOS / JULIE VITTO