



PIONEERING SPIRITS

ALASKA BREWERS AND DISTILLERS ARE CRAFTING EXCELLENCE

BY RENEE BRINCKS

At first glance, the production space at Ursa Major Distilling looks like many other small-batch operations: a line of fermentation tanks, a still with columns stretching up from a silver drum, wooden barrels used to age spirits.

Look closer, however, and you'll discover several unusual components in this Fairbanks facility. A standard power drill propels a mill that grinds barley. Owners Rob and Tara Borland use a canoe paddle to stir the mash, a mix of milled grain and water that's fermented to create alcohol. The still, which extracts alcohol after the mash is strained, is a stainless steel drum fitted with pipes from a plumbing supply store. Those pipes are stuffed with structured copper mesh normally used as a packing material.

By designing and building his own equipment, Rob Borland established a distillery for a fraction of the normal cost. That self-reliant mindset, often associated with Alaska, extends to the company's sourcing practices. The Borlands ferment rum with Alaskan sourdough, flavor gin with rhubarb from their own garden and purchase Ursa Major's grain from regional farmers. Barley grown in Delta Junction lends a faintly sweet, almost strawberry note to the Long Winter Vodka.

"We try to stay as local as we can," says Borland, who distributes

Ursa Major spirits almost exclusively in the Fairbanks area. The Kenai Peninsula native was inspired by the business practices of his hometown's Homer Brewing Company, which also keeps its products local.

Craft beer and spirits are big on the Last Frontier, from Silver Gulch Brewing, Ursa Major's neighbor and America's northernmost brewery, to the new Icy Strait Brewing along Alaska's Inside Passage near Juneau. The state's thriving industry includes five established distilleries (with a sixth on the way) and more than two dozen existing and planned breweries. A 2014 report from the Brewers Association, a Colorado-based organization representing small and independent American craft brewers, measured a \$239 million annual economic impact from Alaska's breweries alone.

Like Ursa Major, other producers look to local ingredients to capture a true taste of Alaska. Fairbanks Distilling Company, which begins production in a former city hall building this autumn, will use Tanana Valley potatoes and Delta Junction barley. Anchorage Distillery sources barley, wheat and winter rye from Alaska farms, and gathers water from a lake fed by the Eklutna Glacier. HooDoo Brewing Company in Fairbanks purchases local pumpkins for its fall pumpkin ale, while other artisans incorporate Alaska blue-



berries, highbush cranberries, rose hips, spruce tips, artemisia (wormwood) and herbs into their beers and spirits.

“People are curious about local products. They want something from the source, and they want to know who made it,” says Hoo-Doo’s Karen Wilken.

At Port Chilkoot Distillery in Haines, a new tasting room opens into the production space so that guests can watch as Heather Shade and Sean Copeland create and hand-bottle their small-batch spirits. Copeland spent a year repurposing the building, a former military bakery on historic Fort Seward that now features reclaimed wood fixtures and custom-built steel and copper kettles. Despite their non-distilling background (Shade was a National Park Service biologist and Copeland a carpenter), the couple has created a gin that won two prestigious awards in 2015: a double gold medal at the San Francisco World Spirits Competition and a gold at the American Craft Spirits Association competition. The 50 Fathoms Gin balances juniper essence with earthy spruce and cinnamon, and the citrus finish comes from tangerines that Shade’s parents ship from their California farm.

Shade and Copeland’s decision to open a distillery in a small, rural Southeast Alaska town came from a desire to create careers



HEATHER SHADE (2)

Owner Rob Borland (at left, above) designed much of the equipment at Ursa Major Distilling in Fairbanks; he uses local ingredients for spirits such as rum.

that would keep them in Haines while providing personal and professional growth. They also saw an opportunity to work with the region's tourism industry. As the founding president of the Distillers Guild of Alaska, Shade and her colleagues lobbied for 2014 legislation that allows distilleries to operate on-site tasting rooms and offer limited samples and sales.

"That single thing—allowing us to have visitors and thereby join the tourism industry—is what enables us to survive in this kind of business," says Shade, who now welcomes locals as well as cruise ship and ferry passengers and independent travelers exploring Alaska by air and road.

A few blocks away, Paul Wheeler and Jeanne Kitayama are finishing a new downtown Haines Brewing Company location that opens this fall. Wheeler built his original brewing system using old dairy tanks shipped up from Iowa and Minnesota, and the business has operated in its original Dalton City spot since 1999. Haines Brewing concentrates on local distribution only. Captain Cook's Spruce Tip Ale, one of the

brewery's biggest

Port Chilkoot Distillery (below) welcomes visitors to its Haines tasting room. Craft brewery pioneers Geoff and Marcy Larson show off their flagship Alaskan Amber Ale in Juneau (right).

subtle fruit and spice flavors. It's seasoned with spruce tips that Wheeler, Kitayama and their friends harvest by hand.

"We're not striving to be a regional brand you can get anywhere," Wheeler says. "The beauty of travel is finding local products you can't taste at home."

On the Kenai Peninsula, Soldotna



CRAFTING A TOUR

Bryan Caenepeel spent 10 years as a local guide before launching Big Swig Tours, a 3.5-hour exploration of the Anchorage beer scene. During stops at Midnight Sun Brewing Company, King Street Brewing Company and other locations, guests sample a dozen Alaskan beers, fuel up on appetizers, and join brewers on behind-the-scenes tours that explain the production process. Caenepeel also shares stories from the state's brewing past and present between stops.

Big Swig departs six days a week in the summer and offers by-appointment outings throughout the winter. The company is developing an expanded tour that will soon travel to breweries in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, north of Anchorage.



BIG SWIG TOURS

Big Swig Tours takes visitors behind the scenes.

Economic Development Director Stephanie Queen also sees craft beverage production benefiting both local tourism and local quality of life.

"A few years ago, we were fighting the perception that there was nothing to come back here for. Now that's no longer the case," she says.

Queen cites community building efforts by Kassik's Brewery, St. Elias Brewing Company, Kenai River Brewing, High Mark Distillery and other producers who support local charities, sponsor events and create popular gathering spots. Her office works

to help such businesses, much like homesteaders who arrived in Soldotna in 1947.

"This is still a place where you can take a risk to create something from nothing, and you'll see it succeed," she says.

Former teacher Doug Hogue took that kind of risk when he debuted Kenai River

Brewing in 2006, just before Frank and Debara Kassik opened Kassik's Brewery up the road in North Kenai. The three entrepreneurs had to encourage local customers to try something new; many were loyal to big-brand lagers without the flavor complexities of these new craft releases. Kenai River Brewing's Breakfast Beer, for example, has hints of milk, oatmeal and chocolate and looks indigo in the glass.

This August, Kenai River Brewing broke ground on a new

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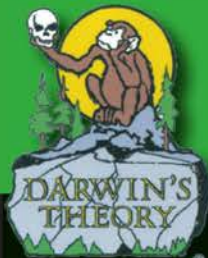
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facility off the Sterling Highway, near Soldotna Creek Park. Hogue is doubling his brewing capacity, and he's adding outdoor seating, nature trails and an expanded, family-friendly tasting room.

"The community has really come together and supported breweries here on the peninsula, and across the entire state," says Kenai Peninsula resident and beer writer Bill Howell. He chronicles the state's brewing history in his 2015 book, *Alaska Beer: Liquid Gold in the Land of the Midnight Sun*.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Howell explains, a brewery's opening helped confirm a community's transition from trading post to established town. Some early residents took issue with alcohol and banned it entirely; today, some Alaska localities still outlaw alcohol. But other communities dedicated pioneer beer and spirits revenues to infrastructure.

"The first public schools in Alaska were built with revenues from saloon fees," Howell says. "They were essential drivers in economic development."

Prohibition ended legal brewing and distilling in the state. And a redirection of resources during World War II all but halted new beverage production. High shipping and distribution rates further slowed the industry's growth in Alaska, and those costs continue to challenge current-day producers.

Despite all those obstacles, a pioneering Juneau couple kick-started the state's brewing resurgence in 1986. Geoff and Marcy Larson opened Chinook Alaskan Brewing Company (later renamed Alaskan Brewing Company) with the support of 88 private investors who saw potential in the young couple's plans. Today, Alaskan Brewing distributes to 17 U.S. states, and it ranks 20th on the list of top American craft brewing companies. Alaskan sells 161,700 barrels a year; by comparison, the largest U.S. craft brewer, Yuengling of Pennsylvania, sells 2.9 million barrels annually.

Alaskan Brewing's first release was an amber ale inspired by an old recipe from Douglas City Brewing Company, which



operated near Juneau in the early 1900s. The coppery-colored beer is smooth and malty, balanced with just a hint of bitterness. When Alaskan Amber won Great American Beer Festival medals in 1987 and 1988, it brought national attention to the state's then-fledgling brewing industry. Expansion continued from there, but the company still keeps its focus close to home.

Visitors to the Anchorage Distillery tasting room can sample four different types of vodka, plus gin and whiskey.



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"Inspired by their experience getting the finances and having buy-in from all these Alaskans, Geoff and Marcy became incredibly committed to making beer that represents Alaska—and especially Juneau," says Andy Kline of Alaskan Brewing.

Because Juneau is only accessible by flight or ferry, the brewery also takes innovative steps to control shipping costs while lightening its environmental impact. A custom steam boiler that powers production equipment runs on spent grain, a byproduct of the beer-making process. Alaskan Brewing also captures carbon dioxide from fermentation and recycles it for production.



CHRIS AREND

In addition to its artisan ales and lagers, Glacier BrewHouse has great pub food at its downtown Anchorage location.

The success of Alaskan Brewing paved the way for other standouts statewide, including Midnight Sun Brewing Company, celebrating 20 years; Broken Tooth Brewing, winner of nine Great American Beer Festival medals; and Anchorage Brewing Company, a recent addition that distributes its respected barrel-aged beers globally. But, as Alaska's brewers and distillers distinguish themselves with distinctive recipes and methods, Paul Wheeler of Haines Brewing believes that one similarity remains.

"We're all in this business to make a great product." ▲

Renee Brincks is based in San Francisco.

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