

## DRIFTWOOD BREWERY

*Victoria's newest brewers carve out their own niche...*



Victoria Harbour

**Driftwood has chosen to position itself not by timidly toeing the water with a safe lager and pale ale, but rather by plunging in with a strong opening trio of brews...**

by Joe Wiebe

It takes me a while to find Victoria's newest brewery on a rain soaked, cold December day. I've been searching among a jumble of identical warehouses in the industrial district just north of downtown for 20 minutes when I finally spot the building number. Even then, the only proof that I'm at the right spot is the delivery van with the brewery logo parked out front. There is no big sign advertising the brewery and certainly no fancy storefront hawking bottles, T-shirts or novelty bottle key chains. Not yet at least. After all, **Driftwood Brewery** has only been in operation since August, and their first kegs rolled out to local pubs on October 10.

Inside, the brewery's President, Kevin Hearsum, is at the top of a tall ladder, pouring something into a giant brew kettle. I tell him not to rush down, but he says he's finished anyway.

"What were you adding to the batch?" I ask when he reaches the concrete floor. "I can't tell you," he says with a smirk. "It's a secret ingredient." I pry him for an answer, but he won't tell me what it is. "Can't let the competition know."

And there is plenty of competition in Victoria, which is rapidly becoming one of Canada's top beer destinations with three other craft breweries – Vancouver Island, Lighthouse and Phillips – and three excellent brewpubs – Spinnakers, Swans and the Canoe. But the feeling around here is there is plenty of room for what Driftwood has to offer. With a strong local contingent of beer lovers bolstered by the hordes of tourists that descend on Victoria each year, maybe they're right.

What I find most interesting, however, is how Driftwood has chosen to position itself in this market. Not by timidly toeing the water with a safe lager and pale ale, but rather by plunging in with a strong opening trio of brews. Two out of its three debut beers are Belgian styles, a saison and wit, with which average beer drinkers may not be very familiar.

That said, not all of Driftwood's brews are off-the-wall strange. Far from it. Their signature brand, Driftwood Ale, is a straightforward Northwest Pale Ale, very drinkable with a rich malt foundation and a sharp bite of hops. A safe but solid choice for tourists looking for a local brand.

And, thanks to the recent popularity of hefeweizens and blanche/white beers, cloudy Belgian wits aren't too confusing for mainstream beer drinkers any more either. Even so, Driftwood's White Bark Ale is a pretty tame take on the wit style, rather on the light side in flavour, body and mouth feel. Still, it will probably be a big hit on sun-drenched patios come summertime.

However, the other Belgian, a saison called Farmhand Ale, is a delight. Traditionally brewed by Belgian farmers for their farm-hands during harvest, it employs 10% sour mash along with cracked black pepper. When I sample it at the brewery, I find the pepper to be very quiet; I don't taste it so much as feel it in my sinuses. Overall, it's a delicious beer.

Hearsum admits they have been surprised by the Farmhand Ale's popularity—they thought it would be the most challenging of their debut trio, but it has sold almost as well as the Driftwood Ale.

I also get a preview taste of Driftwood's newest brew, a London-style porter called Blackstone Porter. Strong and black with a distinct chocolate malt character, it is a good choice for a cold winter's day ideally spent sitting in front of a fire. Then I am off to meet the CEO, Jason Meyer.

Meyer is Driftwood's Brewmaster, and "the ultimate recipe writer," according to Hearsum. Brewing has been a big part of Meyer's life

for close to 20 years. After tasting his grandfather's home brew as a teenager, he became an avid home brewer himself, first with simple kit beers and then moving on to more complex recipes, often creating them himself when his research led him to a style that he couldn't find a recipe for.

Hearsum and Meyer, both just under 35 years of age, met while working at Lighthouse Brewing, another Victoria operation that has been cranking out excellent beer since 1998. They ended up working together on Wednesdays and spent most of those workdays scheming about starting their own brewery.

I find Meyer in the brewery office where he says he has spent the past couple of hours wading through a stack of invoices and liquor distribution branch forms. Not very exciting stuff, but as soon as we start talking I can tell he believes in what he is doing.

"We wanted to stake out our space as a brewer of Belgian beers in the Northwest," he says

regarding their debut trio of beers, but acknowledges that "we've gone with two Belgian styles that are relatively approachable. Saison will not scare people away."

Meyer is a big-picture sort of guy. He doesn't believe the beer market in Victoria is saturated yet. Far from it. He thinks Driftwood's arrival "helps to expand the landscape of craft-brewed beer in the region. It's a step towards becoming the Portland of the north."

It's an interesting idea. Despite Victoria's small population (approx. 350,000 in the entire Capital Regional District) local restaurateurs and publicans – and thus the brewers that support them – benefit from the more than 3.5 million tourists that visit the charming city every year.

## "It's a lot easier to preach to the converted than be a missionary."

*Driftwood CEO & Brewmaster,  
Jason Meyer*

*cont.'d on pg.57*

*the Driftwood line-up*



"I don't want us to be the last craft brewery that opens in Victoria," Meyer reiterates his belief. "I hope there are 15 craft breweries here in 10 years."

But Meyer acknowledges that Driftwood could never have claimed its position as the city's Belgian-style brewery without the strong craft brewing tradition that has proliferated over the past 25 years in Victoria since Spinnakers Brewpub and Vancouver Island Brewery opened their doors in 1984. As he says: "It's a lot easier to preach to the converted than be a missionary."

Apparently I'm not their only convert. Since December when I visited Driftwood, they have released Brother Bart's Belgian Brown Ale, a dubbel with a spicy zing thanks to the unique addition of dark candi sugar. They have also jumped on board the popular Cask Night movement that has been gaining momentum on the west coast over the past year or so, offering a dry-hopped version of their Driftwood Ale at The Whip's regular Sunday event in Vancouver on March 1, and participating in Spinnakers' inaugural Cask Festival of March 14.

Primarily, though, Driftwood is focusing on brewing good, consistent beer for its local consumers. "We're looking at Sidney to Sooke for now," Meyer says, describing an arc of territory that extends from the top of the Saanich Peninsula



*from left to right: Kevin Hearsom // Jason Meyer & Kevin Hearsom*

north of Victoria out to the Western Communities on the bottom of Vancouver Island.

"It has to be consumed fresh. After all, the craft brewing industry is a response to mass-marketed, sterilized beer that can be shipped over vast distances. Why would we want our beer in Ontario? They have perfectly good beer in Ontario."

I can't argue with his logic, but after tasting Driftwood's debut brews, I find myself wishing he'd at least include Vancouver in the brewery's territory. Oh well. I guess I'll be riding the ferry back and forth even more.

