

Chambersburg brewery taps into craft beer market

By MARCUS RAUHUT

Staff writer

CHAMBERSBURG - For proof that the popularity of craft beer is more than just a passing trend, you don't need to look any further than Roy Pitz Brewing Co. in Chambersburg.

Owners Ryan Richards and Jesse Rotz started four years ago and today are brewing about two batches of beer a week, or the equivalent of about 13,000 bottles.

They recently invested in some new equipment to expand production, installing a larger brewhouse and new fermenting tanks, plus adding bottling capabilities.

"Sales exploded for us recently. We went through the upgrade and we're already back ordered," Rotz said.

At a time when many companies are struggling to stay in business, the craft beer industry is growing by 11 percent, according to the Brewers Association.

The craft brewing industry established its footing in the U.S. in the 1980s.

In the past, people may have been loyal to one beer, but with the growth in craft beers, consumers were more open to trying varieties. Rotz said the younger generation, now 20-somethings, have followed.

Couple that with what Richards called the "you-gotta-try-this-syndrome," where a beer drinker is proud to try something new and share the finding with a friend.

"We know it's a trend that's going to stay," Richards said.

The two view brewing as an art, and so far their art has been well received in the short time they have been in business.

At the 2011 World Beer Championships, the brewery added to its awards collection by taking home three medals for Old Jail Ale-Gold, Daddy Fat Sacks IPA and Truly Honest Ale.

Roy Pitz, tucked in a basement of an old Third Street building, has managed to build a devout following not only in Franklin County but in other parts of the state.

Its four flagship beers are brewed year-round, and it also brews four seasonal varieties and another seven to 10 specialty limited-run beers.

Demand is growing so quickly Rotz said they had to start backing out of outside markets so they could concentrate more on local markets.

"It's crazy. We get calls from wholesalers wanting our beer and asking when we're coming to Maryland and New York," Rotz said. "We're just trying to meet the demand now."

When they first started, they took care of all the wholesaling themselves, but they now they use another company to handle that, which lets them concentrate more on making the beer.

The new equipment speeds up production times and provides more consistency in the product.

"It's a lot easier to schedule our lives so we can go out on the weekends and do samplings," Richards said. "We're really trying to build that market. A lot of people are turning to craft beers."

To expand production capacity, the company moved from a seven-barrel brewhouse to a 20-barrel system, which allows for brewing three times as much in the same amount of time.

Roy Pitz added more fermenting tanks, which for a brewery can be a bottleneck in the production process.

Heating water can be a major expense for a brewery, so solar thermal panels were installed on the roof to cut electric expenses.

But the improvement most people will notice is the bottling capabilities.

Initially, Roy Pitz was only available in draft - on tap, keg or in a growler. This limited where the beer could be sold, especially in chain restaurants that had a limited number of beers on draft.

Selling in bottles will get the product into more restaurants and help manage the company's quick growth.

For now, the business is just Richards and Rotz with the help of a couple of friends who volunteer their time at the brewery.

That will change if business keeps growing at the pace it is now, they said.

Getting a start in the craft brewing industry wasn't always easy.

"It was a tough road, but we're fortunate to be here. We faced a lot of challenges getting started," Rotz said.

"It's definitely a labor of love," Richards said. "It's brutal, but it's something you enjoy. We're not in it to make money. We're in it to create something that can be sustained in the future."

Marcus Rauhut can be reached at mrauhut@publicopinionnews.com and 262-4752, or follow him on Twitter @MarcusRauhutPO.