

ARTISANS

THE BUSINESS OF BEER

A craft brewery with national cred stays right here.

BY JAMES E. HELD

PATCHOGUE—Don't blink when driving down River Avenue in Patchogue if you're looking for the Blue Point Brewery. Better yet, follow your nose toward the redolence of malt. Dampness, combined perhaps with a sense of constructive chaos, best defines a microbrewery. In the background, a cacophony of rock music and air compressors resounds, a slurry of blueberry pulp streams onto the wet floor as, amid a cloud of steam, head brewer Alan Brady steps into a huge vat of spent grains whose essence as wort is destined for the award-winning Toasted Lager. "You know where the growler tubes are?" shouts office-manager Angela Careccia over the din to Chris Amcher, sterilizing empty kegs while assistant brewer Chris Pantieri checks carbonation levels on a massive tank of Hoptical Illusion, an invigorating India pale ale.

"See that tank over there," says cofounder Pete Cotter among the menagerie of equipment. "That's from a brewery in Maryland. That one's from another bankrupt brewery in Pennsylvania. And that one's from Canada. And see this line on the poured concrete floor," points the jovial, brewer with a mop of curly brown hair. "That's all we could do with the money we had after maxing out our credit cards. The other side was done later when we could finally get a business loan."

Partners Cotter and Mark Burford discovered that good homebrew recipes alone won't get you a brewery, and keeping one going demands your total energy, focus and business acumen. And even as their beer-making has impressed more than a handful of critics and led to countless New York beer lovers ordering the Blue Point on tap, the two have taken a road less traveled. They remain committed to the idea that all Blue Point beer should be brewed at their site, a decision that gives them greater control over their craft, even if it limits their growth. It also means that there is a building in Patchogue that turns out 10,000 kegs of beer each year, and growing.

Such success wasn't always so certain. Smitten by the aroma, wooed by the wort, hypnotized by the hops, Cotter and Burford ignored all calls to reason and haunted instead auctions selling the remnants of the doomed Frederick, La Jolla, Red Hook, Pilgrim and Wild Goose breweries. Amid these failed enterprises, they rescued kettles, tanks and other equipment from cutting torches and salvage yards, including bricks from an abandoned lace factory for their tasting room. More sensible souls wondered if the fumes of too much home-brewing had altered their common sense—or if they ever possessed an iota! Toppling copper kettles and dissembling brick mash tuns might have been the least of their problems;

by 1996 when they first entered this heady culinary realm, microbrewing was fraught with bankruptcies. Unlike a decade before when it seemed no brewer could fail, a shakeout was underway, and the venerable *Wall Street Journal* had predicted the demise of this passing fad.

Cotter and Burford had experienced their own share of failures amid the Long Island Brewing Company and Huntington's Cobblestone brewpub where they had worked and brewed. Undaunted, they moved into the 5,000-square-foot, blue prefabricated factory of the defunct Penguin Ice company, and, to raise cash, Cotter worked construction and Burford was a fishmonger. While they brewed and experimented, graphic artist Jim McCune designed the eye-catching labels, and, from the very first sales in 1998, the results for Blue Point have been spectacular.

Just ask the 109 judges at the 2006 World Beer Cup, the globe's most prestigious brewing competition, where Blue Point won a gold medal for its Toasted Lager. A couple of Long Island home brewers had surpassed 2,221 entries from 56 countries, some with brewing traditions spanning the centuries.

Still, our American brewing revolution has nurtured a new generation of professionals, such as head brewer Brady who takes a break from shoveling to explain the importance of ingredients. "Our malts are the best German, English and Belgian varieties," he says, "while the hops that add the characteristic bitterness are both European and from the Pacific Northwest." The main ingredient, water, is of course local. But Brady notes the good fortune that Patchogue water is soft with a mineral content remarkably similar to that of Plzen (or Pilsen), in the Czech Republic, the birthplace of pilsner beer. "It's great for brewing and needs only filtering and a little pH treatment." With 10 years of experience under his belt, Brady is middle-aged in the microbrewing industry, but with today's abundance of quality brews, the era when limpid commercial lagers dominated seems like distant history.

Local brewing ceased on Long Island with the 1947 demise of the Linden Brewery, and Mark and Pete, both natives, remember when "the best beer you could get was a skunky import." Blue Point remains Long Island's only commercial brewery. (Southampton's Publick House is technically a brewpub-restaurant, and

Think Global, Drink Local.

Assistant brewer, Chris Amcher, perched near Blue Point's rescued brick-covered 15-barrel brew kettle. .



Photograph: Lindsay Morris

A TASTE OF BLUE POINT

At 5:45 p.m. on a late winter Friday, the tap room at Blue Point Brewery is already a dynamic, spirited hybrid of a winery tasting room and a college-town bar. The crowd, which fills the smaller-than-you-might-think room by the time the clock strikes six, is as diverse as the beers on offer.

In one corner, fraternity brothers from one of the nearby colleges—easily recognized by the Greek letters on their sweat-shirts—are laughing over pints of Blue Point's Blueberry Ale. In another corner stand two middle-aged men, clearly regulars, filling up their gallon jugs—called growlers—with Hoptical Illusion to extend their tasting experience through the weekend.

Flanked by my two friends, I'm planted right in front of the bar, with Ann Marie stepping us through the 10 beers on offer this particular night. Tastes—which come in 4-ounce plastic cups—are free for all but the final three beers in the flight.

After starting with the Golden Ale—a solid if tame opening foray into brewmaster Mark Burford's wares—we wholly enjoyed the Pale Ale, which was refreshing and not overly hopped. Burford was enjoying a glass of this behind the bar after a sales trip out to the Hamptons earlier that afternoon.

The brewery's flagship beer, the Toasted Lager, was next in the progression in all its unique smoky-nutty glory. It's Blue Point's most widely available brew—just about every local grocery store stocks it—and it's easy to see why.

I tend to like my beers a little bitter on the finish, so the ESB Ale (ESB stands for extra-special bitter or extra-strong bitter) was right up my alley. Caramelly and malty up front, it features a distinctly hoppy, faintly bitter finish that was quite nice.

The Blueberry Ale wasn't a big hit with my group, nor was a 50–50 blend of Blueberry Ale and Oatmeal Stout—called a Black 'n Blue. But, the Oatmeal Stout, which was extremely toasty, tasting almost charred, and, while full bodied, was well balanced and not heavy or sweet.

For an extra dollar, you get to taste the Hoptical Illusion, a classic American IPA—one of my favorite styles. Herbal and grassy on the nose—notes that come from a rare hop grown in Oregon—this is the local beer for any lover of IPAs, without being over-the-top with the hop bitterness.

The last two beers in the “flight” are \$3 per taste, but well worth it. When Ann Marie told us that Blue Point's No Apologies was a double IPA, we were expecting an extremely dry, hop-dominated beer. To our pleasant surprise, there isn't anything to apologize for here. This is an extremely well-made, well-balanced beer with more than enough malty sweetness to balance the hoppy characteristics.

Many American-made barley wines tend to be overly sweet and finish with some alcohol heat, but Blue Point's Old Howling Bastard dodges both bullets showing impeccable balance, depth and deliciousness. I can think of few better foils for a wedge of Maytag blue cheese at the end of a meal.

—Lenn Thompson



Photographs courtesy of Blue Point Brewery

although it still brews most of its seasonal specialty beers on-site, its awesome demand means it brews most of its volume in upstate New York.)

According to Robert Hodson, sales and marketing manager of Union Beer in Brooklyn, which distributes Blue Point and hundreds of other craft beers in New York City, the growing ranks of American gastronomes are beginning to treat craft beer the same way they treated boutique wines 10 years ago, selecting brews to go with certain foods or occasions, celebrating artisan brewers as celebrities, and generally taking beer more seriously. Which is part of the reason the craft beer industry grows about 18 percent annually. But in this capital-heavy business, start-ups still have a 25 percent attrition rate. Blue Point, in contrast, experienced a phenomenal 58 percent growth in 2007. “Ever since the 2006 gold medal, distributors are clamoring for our stuff,” says Cotter. “We even shipped a container to Japan, and a distributor in Chicago bugs us all the time, but if we ship too far we would lose control over quality. We want our beer to be fresh, unpasteurized and without preservatives.” (Interestingly, Public House beers were recently picked up by Pabst Distribution, which will ensure that Southampton beer is available in 50 states in a few years.)

To judge from the list of brews in the tasting room, the variety is astounding as well; besides the flagship products of Summer Ale, Golden Ale, Pale Ale, Hoptical Illusions, Toasted Lager and Blueberry Ale, the discerning drinker can find ESB, Oatmeal Stout, Winter Ale, October Fest, Double Blonde, No Apologies Imperial IPA, OHB, Cherry Imperial Stout and Barley Wine. “We put our creative energy into beer,” Mark says, “but we designed Toasted Lager,” their signature brew, “for the people of Long Island who love a tasty but not too heavy beer that goes great with either red meat or clams.” Without flashy advertisements or massive marketing budgets, Blue Point is building its reputation on tap at over 1,000 establishments in seven states. Brewing, however, uses copious amounts of wa-

ter, so “expansion beyond the annual production of 15,000 31-gallon barrels is hampered by the lack of a city sewage connection, scheduled to change soon,” Burford says. “Then, we’ll upgrade the equipment and improve our bottling line as well.”



“By growing, we can remain in charge of production and distribution, although the gold medal,” Cotter sighs, “has brought us the attention of investors and buyers, but we aren’t interested. I just delete those e-mails.”

Blue Point is instead eyeing their business neighbors in this small industrial complex as places to expand because, as Mark explains, “Microbrewing remains strong in the Northeast where people are more open-minded, but we are Long Islanders who love beer and we intend to stay right here.”

For tastings and tours, visit the brewery at 161 River Avenue, Patchogue, 631-475-6944, Thursdays and Fridays 3–7 p.m., or Saturdays noon–7 p.m., or www.bluepointbrewing.com.