

Crafting specialty beers one bottle at a time

By Kathryn Reed

Beer. It's one four-letter word that can help make this heat wave tolerable.

And Ray Loehrer has plenty of it right now. The South Lake Tahoe home brewer bottled a couple cases on Friday. And the mugs were already chilling in the freezer.

His kitchen and laundry room look a little like makeshift science labs. Water is boiling on the stove to sterilize the caps. The dishwasher is whirring as the bottles get one last hot rinse and dry.

Two 5-gallon containers sit in the laundry room. Yeast needs to be in a dark room to ferment – and that's the darkest place in the house that has room to move around in.



A stopper allows for the perfect amount of beer to fill each bottle.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

The fermentation process takes two weeks – one week to ferment, one to settle. At the bottom of the glass container

is what looks an inch worth of yeast. It's important none of that ends up in the bottles that will be consumed.

Those large containers are soon drained into another bucket where corn sugar that has been dissolved in hot water is added. This has to do with the carbonation process.

The brewing part he does outside with a propane tank. He said it smells too much to do it inside. It can take four to five hours to brew.

Loehrer has been brewing his own beer for more than 20 years. He admits they weren't that great to begin with. But experience makes a difference.

In 2009, he entered his first and only competition – the California State Fair. He entered three beers. The Belgian Ale earned a second place and the Amber Ale third place.

The water, yeast and hops all can make a difference in the end product. He refuses to use tap water because most water companies add chlorine – South Tahoe PUD included. This is why he insists on purified water.

When Loehrer first started he was using dry yeast. Now he swears by liquid yeast.

He whips up a batch of beer a few times a year. The busy season is Christmas because his hobby has turned into a gift for others.

While he likes his Honey Ale, Porter and Belgian Ale the best, he does drink beers that he hasn't made.

A raspberry wheat he made was a big hit with friends. Some people have asked to buy a six-pack or case, but he wants to stay away from the legal issues of doing that. He's good with sharing.

One thing Loehrer says is important is sterilization. From the

caps to the bottles to the tubes that transfer that liquid amber – they all go through at least one sterilization process.

He can buy a case of bottles for about \$7. The theory of using the brown bottles is that they let less sunlight in.

While Loehrer created labels, he quickly realized that getting them off for the next batch was time consuming. Now he puts a tiny sticker on each bottle cap so people will know what they are about to ingest. Those all get thrown away, while bottles can be reused.

The capping process, while a bit labor intensive, is still easier than what he first used. This is more like a hand press.

In about a month the beer will be great for consuming. The 3-week-old Honey Ale was tasting pretty darn good on this bottling day. Loehrer said a brewer must imbibe while brewing and that those in the room must do so too – it's all about tradition.

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