

Brewery brings Old World style to Tahoe-Truckee



Eli Pasciak, Tahoe Mountain Brewing Co. brewmaster, explains the significance of barrels. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

TAHOE CITY – Some were blondes, others a rich red, some were full bodied, others were classic. All were 3 ounces of liquid enjoyment.

The sampler at Tahoe Mountain Brewing Co. introduces people to eight of the more than 20 varieties of beer at the Tahoe City pub. A few miles away in Truckee these concoctions and others are being made.

“Our goal is to create a more dynamic drinking experience,” Eli Pasciak, head brewer at Tahoe Mountain Brewing Co., told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We want to accentuate aromas. We don’t want

a one-note experience or drink.”



A sampler of beers.

Based on the variety of samples – which come in tiny glasses that are placed on a serving board in the shape of Lake Tahoe – Pasciak has achieved his goal.

Sue liked the Paddle Board, a well-balanced pale ale with hints of fruit. I was most enamored with the Sugar Pine Porter that has a chocolate finish.

The Viejo Rojo is their top seller. It's a barrel aged sour.

Aaron Bigelow and Tanya Thayer opened the pub on June 2, 2012. There is a small brewery upstairs, but the bulk of the beer is made off-site. Only their beer is sold at the pub. They also run a bottle shop in Truckee that carries 400 beers from around the world. The main brewery, which offers tours by appointment, also has a tasting room.

The couple quit their jobs – he was a custom homebuilder and she a dental tech – to open Tahoe Mountain Brewing Co. The seasonality of the business has been one of the harder things to cope with. But on Saturday the place was packed as snow and rain drove people indoors.

“Even if all the locals came in every day, it’s not enough to support what we are doing. We rely heavily on visitors,” Bigelow said.

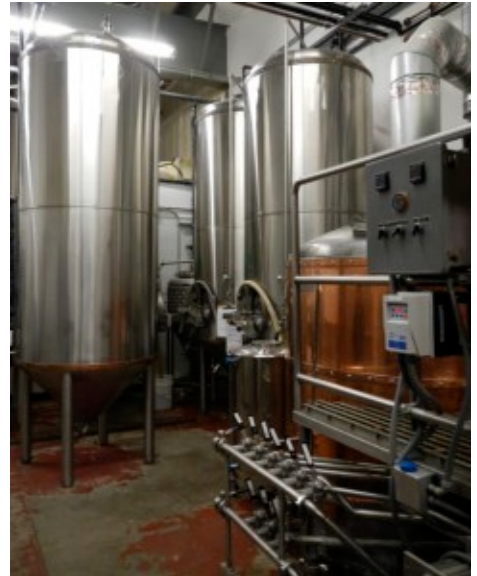
The pub is across from Commons Beach in the Cobblestone center. The large picture windows, and interior of wood and rock give it a definite Tahoe feel. TVs in the bar and dining area are muted, but it is definitely loud with just the cackle of conversations. The openness is casual and inviting.

The menu is typical pub food, with limited choices for a vegetarian. Cutting back on the number of items was something the couple had to learn so the kitchen didn’t get backed up. (Neither one had prior restaurant experience.)

The service was excellent. And that’s one thing Bigelow lamented about – the seasonality often means having to lay off quality employees who may have moved on when he is ready to put them back on the payroll.

A pub wasn’t even in the original plans. The couple looked for a place in Tahoe City to start the brewery but could not find the right parcel, so they ended up in Truckee. But when the restaurant space became available they jumped at it. So now they have the dual operation.

Bigelow’s interest in a brewery started with creating beers at home. But he knew he needed to hire experts if he were to be successful. Two brewmasters and an apprentice work in Truckee coming up with beers that are made in the Old World – Belgian style. Maybe a dozen craft beer makers are doing this in California. (Not all the beers are made this way; there are traditional lagers and IPAs.)



Tanks at the Truckee facility.

“They call them the Burgundies of Belgium. They are called sours because of the yeast strains,” Bigelow told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We are the only all grain from scratch not from extract brewery on the lake.”

It takes longer to create this type of beer. But the richness is evident in each sip.

“They drink more like wine. They are more complex, much dryer, have low pH levels like in the 3.2, 3.6 range. That would be similar to a dry brute Champagne,” Bigelow said. “A lot of times we back blend fruits. Maybe for two or three months it sits on fruits – cherries, blueberries, strawberries.”

Pasciak’s experience as a chef contributes to his awareness of what works on the palate. He wants to blend flavors to create complex beers, but also beers that will pair well with food.

“We like different brews from course to course,” he said. It’s much like pairing wine with food.

On the status board at the brewery is a list of what needs to be done, what beers are in which vat, and other details.

Pasciak had been out shopping for the bacon that morning for

what will become Bacon Baltic Porter. It will require a longer fermentation process and need to be kept cooler – more like 50 degrees. (An ale is usually at 60 to 70 degrees.)

The 11 tanks are mostly stainless steel, though copper is also used. Some are cone-shaped which allows the yeast to filter out.

In a neighboring building are the more than 300 barrels. Some are from wine, others from Cognac, Bourbon and Muscat. Soon a trip will be made to France to inspect nine Fudore barrels that can store 3,000 to 5,000 gallons.

Bigelow called this a rare find.

“The idea is with less surface area of the oak the oak influence becomes smoother,” he said.

Each barrel has its own peculiarities. For Pasciak he wants to know the entire history of the barrel so he will have better knowledge of what it will do to the beer.

“A barrel to me is an ingredient,” Pasciak said.

French oak offers more spice, sometimes coconut, whereas vanillans come out of American oak.

Each barrel has a different flavor profile.

In trying to be as sustainable as possible, Tahoe Mountain sends its spent grains to a farmer in Reno. It's fed to his livestock and mixed with fertilizer for the fields. Produce and eggs are delivered to Tahoe Mountain, and some of the farmer's goods are incorporated into the beer.

About 5,000 barrels, each containing 31 gallons, are produced annually. Capacity is about maxed out. And that's fine for Bigelow – at least for now.