

BELGIAN BREWING IN NORTHERN MINNESOTA? BOREALIS FERMENTERY BREWS SUPERIOR BEER

By Melissa Maki

There has been a global resurgence of craft beer in recent years — and Belgian beer occupies an elevated status within that boom. Beer aficionados swoon and wax poetic over the diminutive nation's abundance of quality brews.

With Belgian beer's rising popularity, an increasing number of brewers from around the world are attempting to duplicate Belgian beer styles. More often than not, however, these imitative brews lack a particular character or balance that is difficult to pinpoint. They typically bear a resemblance to their heirs but usually can be likened to distant cousins rather than direct progeny. So, what is it that gives Belgian beer that certain *je ne sais quoi*?

Ken Thiemann, the man behind Borealis Fermentery, would argue that, in part, it's small-batch brewing that helps produce an extraordinary product.

Trappist monks in Belgium have been making beer for centuries, starting long before the country gained independence. In addition, small-batch brewing has long been the norm rather than the exception. Though big brewing conglomerates certainly exist in Belgium, so do scores of small, family-run breweries. Villages often produce their own special beers, encouraging local pride around the beverage.

Few North American brewers are invested in producing exceptional Belgian-style beers, but Ken Thiemann may be counted among them. Thiemann would argue that, in part, it's small-batch brewing that helps produce an extraordinary product. He is the man behind

PHOTO BY MELISSA MAKI



Ken Thiemann, owner and brewer at Borealis Fermentery of Knife River, Minn.

Borealis Fermentery, a tiny brewery in Minnesota on the north shore of Lake Superior, which opened in 2012 and has been steadily growing and gaining accolades.

Borealis Fermentery is unique in a number of ways. It is housed in a striking timber-frame, straw-bale building. The giant exposed wooden beams and contrasting white walls give it an Old World feel. Thiemann says Belgian monasteries inspired the design. Borealis Fermentery is one of the few straw-bale breweries in the world, perhaps the only one.

Thiemann was a homebrewer for nearly two decades before embarking on his dream to build a brewery. In his 42 years, he has had a series of surprisingly diverse ambitions. He once aspired to be a doctor. He almost played professional hockey. He has written children's books, gigged as a musician and worked as an engineer. But he found his true passion in brewing. It's a creative outlet for him like no other.

"With engineering, I could never appeal to the artist side of me," Thiemann says. I was one of those kids who had a chemistry set growing up. When I was young, I said, 'Someday I

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want to be a mad scientist.' And here I am. It's a fun thing. I get to experiment."

Thiemann prides himself on crafting Belgian-style beers that include his own distinctive mark. "I can brew a beer that tastes like a Belgian beer, but I wanted to brew a Belgian beer that was different," he says. "I had to twist a few of my techniques around to develop a fingerprint for my beer that was different. And I think I've got it. I'm never quite satisfied with where I'm at, but that was a big part of my plan."

Thiemann brews a saison with raisins and a wit with kaffir lime leaves and lemongrass. Mon Cherries is one of his newest brews. It's a decadent, Belgian-style dubbel made with chocolate malt and Minnesota cherries, aged on toasted oak. "It's a weird beer. It would go well with a steak," says Thiemann.

The Building of a Brewery

Thiemann studied civil engineering at Michigan Tech and credits a homebrew club there as well as Charlie Papazian's seminal book, *The Complete Joy of Homebrewing*, with helping him to hone his brewing skills. He also studied engineering in Amsterdam and worked as an engineer in Delft after that. Thiemann's time in the Netherlands influenced his palate and his philosophy about beer. While there, he regularly traveled to Belgium to sample beer and visit breweries. He claims to have learned some tricks from brewers in Belgium that give his beer an edge.

"I have my quirky secrets, some that I learned from small-batch brewers in Belgium," he says. "I won't talk about those. They're the sacred things. Let's hope that, as the brewery grows, I can keep those up."

After moving back to the States, Thiemann spent some dismal days working as a sewer engineer before determining he had to make a career change. While traveling for work one day, he noticed a parcel of property for sale. He and his wife bought the land the following week. From there, Thiemann's dream of building a Belgian-style brewery began to take shape.

It has been a hard-won dream, fraught with hurdles. Early on, Thiemann's plan to sell 750-ml bottles of beer was hampered by state restrictions. He had to enlist the assistance of a state senator and the craft beer community in order to change the law. This was a crucial move, according to Thiemann, because bottle-conditioning is key for the types of beer he wants to produce.

Although he has been available by the keg in area restaurants, he prefers that it be served from the bottle. "For my beer,

personally, I believe that kegging it takes an A beer and turns it into a B beer. It is meant to be in bottles. The bottle is the vessel," he says. "There is a beautiful Belgian saying: 'The beer is the art, the bottle is the frame.'"

Reluctant to take out loans, Thiemann sacrificed his life savings, his physical and mental health, and ultimately his marriage, all to realize his dream. He literally built Borealis Fermentery from the ground up. He had help from contractors during some key steps along the way, but he largely built the brewery with his own hands.

Thiemann and his then-wife lived in an uninsulated shed on the property during part of the process — which ended up being

a grueling three-year saga riddled with challenges. He lost both of his parents during this time, and at one point he fell off the roof and snapped the tendons in both of his feet.

"I've climbed mountains and run marathons, but this was — by a long shot — the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," says Thiemann. "If you want to start a brewery, do not do what I did. It will make

you more proud than anything you've ever done in your life, but it took my soul out of me. It pressed me to my physical and mental limits."

The hard work and suffering finally may have paid off for Thiemann. "I get up in the morning and I love what I do every day. I didn't have that as an engineer," he says. He is earning awards at local beer festivals, his distribution list is expanding, and he's having trouble keeping up with demand.

As Borealis Fermentery grows, one of Thiemann's primary concerns is maintaining quality and authenticity. "We live in a world where nothing is real anymore. Well, when you hear about the self-made business entrepreneur, this is as real as it gets," he says. "From the ground up, from the word go, this has been about as real as anything can get. And it's working. I have a waiting list of different places that want to carry my beer. The crazy thing is, at the end of the day, I sit around and look up at this and realize that I did all these beams and timber framing. I did this. It's real. This is the American dream." **CBM**

Melissa Maki became a freelance writer while living in Belgium. Once she had the opportunity to write about beer and bike rides, there was no going back to a "normal" job. She has written beer-related articles for Flanders Today and Belgian Beer and Food, as well as online publications Food Loves Beer and Honest Cooking.



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