

Homebrewed craft beer and wine soaring in popularity

Story & Photography By Kristen Spruit

Now that the weather is cooling off, it might be time to consider an indoor hobby. There is nothing better on a cool fall day than curling up near the fire with a glass of your favourite wine or craft beer. Why not get away from the commercial, mass-produced products and make your own creation to share with friends.

The drink of choice that was once synonymous with Labatt Blue, Molson's or Carling has grown into a passion and a pursuit for a generation that is more cultured and educated about their choice of alcohol, says Patricia Morrison, manager at Airdrie's Home Vintner.

"Beer and beer drinkers are not what they once were. When I was a little girl, what did my dad have to choose from? There are just so many more flavours and options available now," she says about the many micro-breweries that have sprung up across the country in the last decade.

But quality is always more important than quantity for this brewmaster, who left a 15-year position with the Calgary Board of Education to venture into home brewing. She said a sign she saw advertising home-brewing courses while on her way home from work one afternoon in 1995 gave her the push she needed to turn her curiosity into a real hobby.

"I was really intrigued. My parents had been making wine at home (in southern Ontario) and I had been wanting to get into it too for a little while," she said.

After taking a course at the Home Vintner in northeast Calgary - owner Paul Sass' original location - she knew her days of commercial alcohol were over. It wasn't until a few years after learning to home-brew wine - Morrison's drink of choice - that she got into experimenting with beer. She has since coined her own version of a brown ale that's reminiscent of black forest cake. "Pat's Cherry Porter" is a rich, creamy beer with a smoky character and notes of chocolate.

Morrison made the leap in 2002 to turn her hobby into a profession, shifting her focus to beer and wine education. She runs the Airdrie location at 213 Main St. North - the eighth location in the region - managing store sales, teaching home-brewing classes and experimenting with new beer flavours. But the hobby is still not lost on her. She brewed all the red and white wine, beer and champagne for

her son's wedding last year.

"It's really something special because having a glass of beer or wine is part of most people's day and definitely special occasions, and then people realize that you made it yourself and that just makes it so unique," she said, adding that her son was "amazed at the quality of this homemade swill he expected" when he tasted her home-brewed pilsner for the first time.

Quality Brews

Flavour and quality are the cornerstones of the Home Vintner and what Sass and Morrison attribute to the business' success.

A former pilot, Sass said home-brewing was a hobby that "got out of control" for him.

He opened the Home Vintner's first location in Calgary in 1994, and has since helped spread his passion for fine wine and quality beer to more than 12,000 students at his eight locations.

Sass can rattle off any one of the hundreds of beer combinations he knows how to make, but says even he hasn't stopped learning.

"I've travelled to 39 countries doing my homework - analyzing beers from different places and trying to recreate and invent. But what makes this such a great hobby is that it's a non-stop learning curve. You never get to the end of what there is to know," he says.

Selection & Variety

The Home Vintner sells 12 different baron kits, including an amber, brown, golden, pale and redwood ale, as well as a pilsner, lager and Mexican cerveza. Morrison, Sass and other Home Vintner employees have developed about 25 ad packs, which are malt, spice or fruit packs that can be added to the baron kit during the primary stage to give the beer a different flavour. There are also 46 different varieties of liquid yeast and four hops that can be combined to give a different result.

"The possibilities are really limitless. It's up to one's imagination how many different kinds of beers you can have," says Sass, adding he thinks the variety available at micro-breweries and the amount people travel to new countries is surging the trend for higher-quality beer.

Fall Flavours

With patio season winding down and winter on the horizon, Morrison and Sass recommend two unique beers to try during the fall season.

Dubbed "Thanksgiving in a glass," the Roasted Pumpkin Cerveza is a fall favourite.

"The pumpkin gives that seasonal flavour, and the hints of cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger and cloves really give it character," says Sass, adding that the recipe, available at any Home Vintner location, calls for about six pounds of roasted pumpkin. It's best served with a turkey or a pumpkin pie in the fall, he says.

The second is the Winter Spice Amber Ale. Starting with a Barons Amber Malt kit, fall flavours like nutmeg, cloves, orange peel and coriander compliment the light, biscuit flavour of the malt.

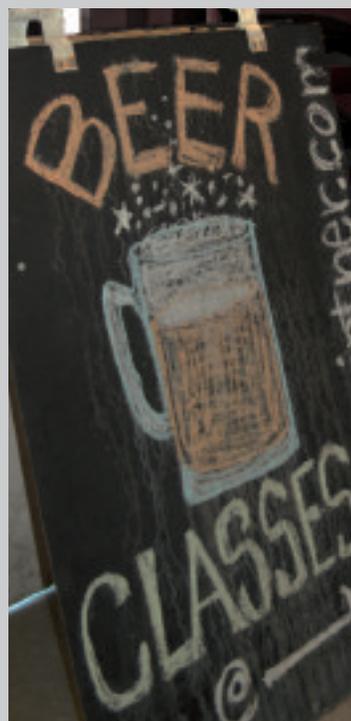
"Sit down with a glass of this at the fire and a piece of dark chocolate - that's perfect," says Morrison.

"People don't normally think of pairing beer with food - that's usually a wine thing - but with home-brewed beers, the variety and quality and flavour can really compliment a meal," Morrison says, adding that home-brewed beer doesn't give people the bloated or full-feeling people generally expect with commercial beers, which are usually cut with rice and chemicals.

The basic ingredients in a home-brewed beer is simply water, hops, malt and yeast.

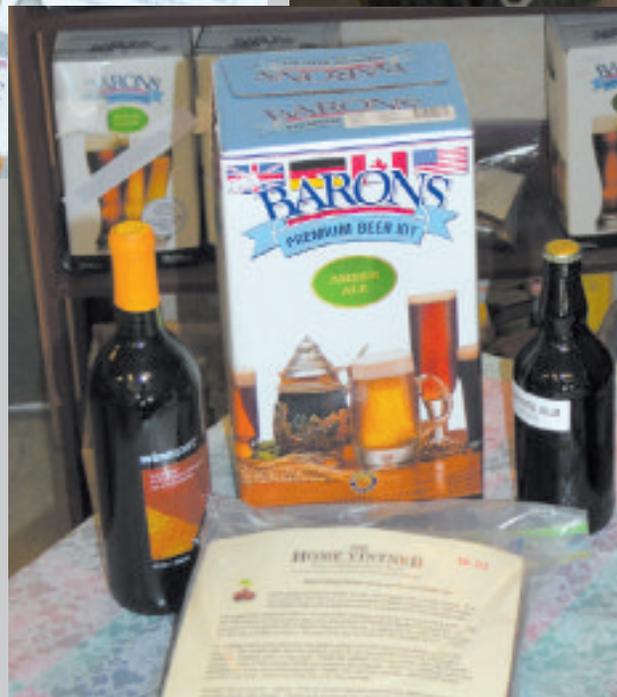
The most important aspect to creating a good home-brewed beer is the quality of the ingredients, and secondly, the quality of the process, say the two experts. Although the kits provide straight-forward, easy-to-follow directions, beer turns out best with good guidance, they add, recommending first-timers to take a course first.

A class will teach students about the equipment used, the ingredients, weather systems and how they affect the brewing process, and what techniques produce the best-quality beer. Working in a room that is around room temperature (23°C) is ideal to be able to ferment and bottle the beer in the most optimal time, but different styles of beer take longer than others to produce the best flavour and the ideal alcohol content.



The Process

1. Prepare the Ad Pack. Each Ad Pack requires a different process depending on the ingredients.
2. Clean and sanitize all the equipment. This is critical so the beer is not contaminated.
3. In the primary fermenter, mix the malt in the beer kit with the Ad Pack, water and liquid yeast.
4. Let the liquid sit for 24 to 48 hours, checking the gravity with a hydrometer to make sure it reaches the specific gravity listed in the beer kit.
5. Once the specific gravity has been achieved, siphon the liquid into the carboy.
6. Let sit at for a minimum six weeks to allow the beer to clear.
7. Stir in the corn sugar to prime for bottling.
8. Bottle and enjoy.



One beer kit, which averages around \$40, will make about five-and-a-half dozen 341 ml beer bottles.

"It ends up being very economical for a very high-quality beer that doesn't compare to anything you buy at the liquor store," Sass says, adding the shelf-life of home-brewed beer, like wine, gets better with age and can sit up to two years.

Morrison and Sass are convinced their passion and pursuit can become just as intoxicating for even the most anti-beer drinker.

"Once you've tasted the best of what's out there - you've tried a Cherry Porter or a Redwood Chocolate Ale or a Tartan Stout - you can't go back to drinking the commercial labels. It just doesn't compare," says Sass, pouring himself a glass of his own brown ale with Kolsch yeast.

Sass says beer can go from the box to a glass in as little as six weeks but can take up to three or four months.

"Longer and slower is always better. Don't rush the process. More patience produces a better beer," he says.

To start your own homebrew creations this fall, visit The Home Vintner in Airdrie at #4 - 213 Main Street North or call 403-912-6323.

Equipment

The Home Vintner's brewing kit (start-up equipment), which can be used for making beer and wine, costs \$84.95 plus tax and includes all the equipment needed from start-up to bottling. Less than two feet of space is required for the set-up.

Primary Fermenter: A 32-litre food-grade plastic container with a sealed lid used for mixing the ingredients during the start-up process to ferment the liquid, and prior to bottling.

Carboy: A 23-litre glass bottle used to carbonate the beer.

Siphon Hose and Siphon Rod: A five-foot length of food-grade tubing attached to a rigid acrylic rod used for transferring wine from one container to another while leaving sediment behind.

Hydrometer: An instrument used to measure the specific gravity of the liquid.

Bung: Cone-shaped rubber or silicone plug, usually with a hole through the cone's axis to accommodate an airlock, which fits tightly into the neck of a carboy to keep out air, dust and organisms. **Air lock:** Works with a bung to form a one-way valve that seals the carboy at the neck to prevent oxygen and organisms from entering, and allows fermentation gases to escape.