



Urban OASIS

Many things on tap at West Sixth Brewing Company



By Jacalyn Carfagno | Photos by Amy Wallot

On a Friday night this spring West Sixth Brewing Company was a hopping place. People young, old, and in-between relaxed in the spacious tap-room, where they had a choice of half a dozen beers, stouts, and ales brewed a few feet away. Huge windows gave way to an outdoor scene that included a food truck selling its tacos, taquitos, and other Mexican street food; trolleys going by; and people coming and going at the corner of West Sixth and Jefferson.



Flash back about three years and the corner was home to the hulk of an abandoned commercial bakery, its brick walls punctuated by boarded-up windows to the residential neighborhood that surrounded it on the edge of Lexington's downtown.

That same year, four young men came together, united by a love of craft beer and an interest in creating a business that would do well and do good.

Although each had deep Kentucky roots, their backgrounds were varied. Ben Self founded Blue State Digital, which played a key role in Barack Obama's presidential campaign, before selling his interest and returning to Lexington; Brady Barlow, who after majoring in food science at the University of Kentucky went

Above, Amber Pale Ale is one of the beers produced at West Sixth Brewing. Opposite, from left, partners Robin Sither, Brady Barlow, Ben Self, and Joe Kuosman opened the brewery in April 2012.

on to a career in sales; Joe Kuosman, whose background was operations management and manufacturing; and Robin Sither, who served in the Peace Corps in Cameroon before returning to Lexington.

They had looked around and realized that Lexington, with only one craft brewery, was ripe for more. Many cities its size had five or six.

They began to talk and to research the business. "We went through at least a couple of years of just kind of dreaming, try-

ing to write a business plan, trying to find a location ... pretty much baby-stepping through it,” Barlow explained.

The partners knew they wanted to make craft beer that would find fans not just in their own taproom but also in restaurants and on retail shelves throughout Kentucky and beyond. But that wasn’t all, Self said.

“We wanted to make good beer but also wanted to create a company that could do well and give back to the community.”

Environmental stewardship was also critical so they began looking for an old building to recycle. They wanted to be close to downtown but needed industrial zoning to produce beer in volume as well as the zoning flexibility to sell and serve their beers onsite.

It wasn’t an easy bill to fill.

“We had looked at every piece of commercial real estate in town,” Barlow said, not realizing they’d driven by their future home “about 50 times.”

The old Rainbo Bread building may have been a kind of ugly duckling on the outside but it had everything inside: tile walls, a concrete floor sloping to a drain, a walk-in cooler, and a loading dock perfect for the brewing operation, plus huge, open spaces that could easily accommodate a taproom.

It was also in the right place, on the eastern end of the Jefferson Street corridor that has become a restaurant haven, easy to reach from both the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University and the new location of Bluegrass Community and Technical College. Plus, the Legacy Trail that will soon be extended to carry walkers, runners, and cyclists from downtown to the Kentucky Horse Park will go right by.

The partners bought the property in August 2011 with plans to open the following spring. “If there’s any official record-keeper, I know we got the gold medal,” Sither said, referring to the brewery’s opening in barely eight months.

The building they bought had been robbed of all plumbing and wiring, had windows that weren’t much more than holes in the wall, and encompassed about 10 times more space than they needed.

Still, they earned that imagined gold medal, opening in April 2012 after extensive renovations.

By that time, the building had been transformed into what’s called the Bread



The spacious taproom offers views onto the street and into the brewery. Without a kitchen, West Sixth Brewing invites food trucks to provide menu items for patrons to bring inside.

Box, home not only to West Sixth Brewing but also to an eclectic and growing community of artists, entrepreneurs, and community organizations. The surplus space is home to a non-profit bicycle repair shop, a demonstration fish and greens growing project that uses spent grain from the brewing process, a coffee bean roaster, a team of competitive female roller skaters, a micro-distillery, a rock-climbing gym, and a collection of artists including the graphic artists who produced the award-winning design for the West Sixth India Pale Ale cans.

And, West Sixth India Pale Ale had been created.

As craft beer enthusiasts, the partners had an idea of the type of India Pale Ale — a style widely used among craft brewers — they wanted to brew. So Sither, the brew master who learned his craft on the job when he landed at Alltech’s Kentucky Ale Brewery after returning from the Peace Corps, began mixing hops and malts and yeasts in different combinations until they agreed on a taste. Once the brewing system was installed at West Sixth, he did a series of “pilot brewings” to be sure he could replicate that taste consistently. “Things can surprise you,” he said, referring to yeast, which can have a mind of its own. “It’s fermentation, so there’s another party involved.”

Those parties worked together well, and within three months West Sixth added equipment to more than triple the beer it can produce, from 45 barrels a week to 165. The canned beer (cans, it turns out, are better both for the environment and the beer than bottles) is now sold in Louisville, Cincinnati, and an ever-expanding portion of Kentucky. In January, West Sixth added an Amber Pale Ale to its distribution line-up.

FROM BREAD TO BEER



WHAT'S COOKING AT THE BREAD BOX ...

In addition to the brewing facilities and taproom for West Sixth Brewing, the vast building is home to what can only be called a wide assortment of businesses and activities. As the first year came to a close, the list included these, but more are sure to come:

Broke Spoke — an all-volunteer community bike shop

Rollergirls of Central Kentucky (ROCK) — Lexington's only flat track roller derby league

Food Chain — a nonprofit that provides education and hands-on training for indoor food production and processing. It operates a demonstration indoor

aquaponics system, the area's first, that raises tilapia in tanks using the waste grain from West Sixth's beer production as food and then using waste from the fish to grow lettuces, herbs, and microgreens that will filter the water so it can be returned to the fish tanks. Both the fish and the greens will be sold.

Smithtown Seafood — Opening this spring, this fish and chips restaurant will offer counter service only. Operated by Ouita Michel, chef/owner of Holly Hill Inn, it will use some of the fish and greens grown at Food Chain.

Magic Beans — a local coffee roasting company (West Sixth has made beer using this coffee!)



Bluegrass Distillers — a micro-distillery

Bluegrass Bouldering — a rock-climbing gym

The Bread Box Studio Artists — nine artists occupy small studios housed in the former office space for the bakery

Their approach to selling is very simple, Self said. "Robin makes really great beer, so our marketing strategy is let people taste the beer and they'll want to buy it."

The taproom is pretty simple, too. The partners decided against offering food and focus solely on beer. "If you run a brew

pub, you are a restaurant first and a brewery second," Self explained.

The taproom they've created has the wide, open spaces and high ceilings you'd expect in a renovated industrial facility. But it also has a warm feeling that comes from a wooden bar (made from maple salvaged from the old bread factory loading dock), the tables made by a local craftsman, which also have tops fashioned from salvaged wood, a huge ceiling fan (another local product from Big Ass Fans), murals, and the constant interplay with the street scene through the large windows.

But people want food when they drink, and if they have it they stick around longer and buy more beer. The solution was to invite food trucks to the Bread Box. That gives those entrepreneurs a built-in market and taproom customers a revolving set of dining choices. A more permanent option will be on site soon when chef Ouita Michel opens Smithtown Seafood inside the Bread Box. With counter service only, customers will be able to take their fish and chips into the taproom to eat as they sample the beers on tap.

One year in, West Sixth beers have won awards and loyal fans, and the partners are planning to expand capacity once again.

They have done well. And they've also done good. The partnership agreement stipulates that 6 percent of profits will be given to non-profits in the community, and West Sixth has had money to hand out every month.

West Sixth invited its Facebook friends to come over for "an epic celebration" of its first birthday in April. More than 600 people accepted the invitation online and the first 500 to arrive received gift commemorative pint beer glasses with the West Sixth logo printed on one side. On the other was written, "One year old and hoppier."

The birthday party, complete with cupcakes, was a crowded, joyous scene, relegating the dark, silent, and abandoned behemoth the partners had re-discovered only a few years before to a distant memory. 🐾



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