

# What's brewing? Homebrewers like variety

More N.J. residents discovering hobby, honing their beer-making skills

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Michael Petrick goes about making his own beer with a gleeful, borderline-reckless abandon, wielding a wooden stirring paddle that looks like it could move a canoe with no problem as ska music blares from a boombox in his friend's kitchen.

Karl Weiss goes about things a bit differently, working meticulously in a separate building on his property specifically dedicated to homebrewing, having digitally automated part of the process using an iPad.

"I lit myself on fire once," the self-admittedly accident-prone Petrick, 29, of Matawan said in describing just one of many mishaps he has endured in the course of indulging in his hobby – and speaking moments before spilling part of a batch on the family dog of fellow brewer Brandon Stefanski of Old Bridge.

"I'm an engineer, so I'm freakin' neurotic," Weiss, 31, of Roxbury, said, describing the strict attention to detail he tends to exhibit while brewing up a new batch of his own. "I get into hobbies, and I just go nuts with them."

The differences don't stop there. Petrick is a social-studies teacher; Weiss is an engineer. Petrick seems content to pass his beers out to friends at backyard barbecues, while Weiss has entered some of his recipes in the National Homebrew Competition – the largest of its kind in the world.

Still, the men are emblematic of a trend that's finding more and more Garden State residents taking up a hobby enthusiasts describe as simultaneously cheap, fun, easy and rewarding.

"Anyone can make beer," Petrick said. "But it is tough to try and make good beer over and over again."

that would make it legal in all 50 states.)

It wasn't until last January that the Garden State tossed out a requirement that homebrewers obtain a state permit and annually cough up a \$15 filing fee to engage in the hobby. Today, according to the state, any New Jersey resident 21 or older can

homebrew up to 200 gallons of beer annually for "household use or consumption."

The Press of Atlantic City last year reported that "several thousand" state residents had applied for homebrewing permits in 2011, the last year they were required, but thousands more were thought to have brewed at home that year without a permit (the law wasn't exactly

strictly enforced, so many simply decided to ignore it). Figures indicating how many New Jerseyans brew beer at home are tough to come by – nationally, it's estimated that about 1 million Americans do so regularly – but Joe Verzi, owner of Cask & Kettle Home Brew in Boonton, recalled an estimate released around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century indicating that one in every 500 Garden State residents brew at home (somewhere in the neighborhood of 20,000 homebrewers).

If the proliferation of local shops, like his, is any indication, that figure has jumped sharply in the years since.



## Free to brew

Not all that long ago, it was far tougher. Prohibition was repealed in 1933, but homebrewing remained illegal at the federal level for 45 years, until President Jimmy Carter signed a bill reversing that policy in 1978.

Even then, many states were slow to relent to a wave of prospective homebrewers. New Jersey didn't legalize homebrewing until the early 1990s, and as of earlier this year, two states still prohibited the production of beer at home. (Mississippi legalized it last month, while as of last week Alabama legislators were mulling a bill

"It's weird, because we kind of opened at the same time as a whole bunch of other stores in a 50-mile radius," Verzi said. "I thought I was doing something original, but I quickly found out I was not."

Verzi, 30, of East Hanover, said he started homebrewing nearly a decade ago and worked a potpourri of odd jobs (mechanic, office worker, truck driver, car salesman, assistant manager of a restaurant) before opening Cask & Kettle in October 2011.

Some of the recipes Verzi picked up during that time are the same ones customers now brew using the shop's on-site brewing apparatus, although take-home kits and ingredients are available here too. Five-gallon batches, producing about two cases' worth of beer, typically demand about a day's work and can cost \$100 to \$130 if brewed on-site, depending on ingredients, he explained.

"What I always kind of wished I had back then was access to help – real help, real advice ... or somebody who could actually take a look at my recipe and say 'oh, no, no, no, no, you don't want this,'" Verzi said. "We try to encourage (customers) to pick from our list of recipes we keep, because I can guarantee those batches."

Verzi estimated that 75 percent of his retail sales constitute repeat customers, an encouraging rate. Equally encouraging is the notion that inspiration to get started can come from just about anywhere.

"You send somebody to a brewery and they say, 'Wait a second, that's it? I can do that!'" he said. "It's an interesting and great and rewarding hobby."

Four Hunterdon County residents whose daughters play club volleyball together couldn't agree more.

"It has been a lot of fun," Jim Thatch of Flemington said. "I'm still

always learning and trying new things."

Thatch, who works for the county library system, plus David Hilgen of Flemington and their *two other pals* make up **Beat Them Brewing** – it's not an actual company, just a title, though on the surface it's tough to tell. They've got a website, sharp-looking bottle labels and nearly 10 batches under their belt brewing at Cask & Kettle under Verzi's tutelage.

The brewing process is relatively simple; all it takes to make beer is a source of starch (typically malted barley) steeped in hot water and later fermented with yeast and infused with hops (and sometimes other ingredients) to add flavor and



balance. Hilgen says he was the "craft beer geek" of the bunch even before they got started, but he still required some convincing.

"No, I just like to drink beer," Hilgen recalled saying when first approached with the idea.

Now, he's glad he changed his mind. The crew's latest release, Queen Andrea's Revenge, is a schwarzbier, or "black lager," a smooth German style with hints of chocolate and coffee flavors (bottled just last weekend, it was named after the girls' volleyball coach at the **Central Jersey Volleyball Academy**).

"People keep telling me now that 'you should start your own brewery,'" Hilgen said with a chuckle. "All I'm missing is product, financing and a business plan."

## Humble beginnings

Amassing all those things wasn't easy for Michael Kane, but the president of Ocean Township's Kane Brewing Co. has rapidly ascended from being a full-time banker and hobbyist homebrewer whipping up batches in a 500-square-foot New York City studio apartment to the recently elected president of the Garden State Craft Brewers Guild.

A silver and a gold medal at the 2009 National Homebrew Competition, awarded for his stout and a German-style altbier, respectively, helped jump-start Kane's career as a professional brewer – and those two beers were made on a simple 10-gallon setup using parts scraped together for about \$30 at Home Depot, he recalled.

"When I was a homebrewer, I wasn't even really much of a contest guy ... for me it was just 'I like to brew, and I like to drink beer,'" Kane said last week. "I just figured maybe I should enter a couple (beers) in the competition and just see if I know what I'm doing."

"I was psyched. ... I really didn't expect to win anything," he added. "Those weren't even styles that I brewed a ton of, which was even more surprising."

Kane clearly hasn't forgotten his roots since opening his brewery in 2011 at a Monmouth County warehouse in which caskets once were manufactured. He has visited nearly half a dozen New Jersey homebrewing clubs in that time, including Brew World Order, which meets regularly at Maloney's in

Matawan – and when that club held a homebrew competition earlier this year, the winning recipe, a black IPA, was remade as a small batch at the brewery and put on tap there and at Maloney's.

"We're huge supporters of it (homebrewing) – that's how we got here," Kane said. "Everyone on our staff who works on the brewer's side of things was a homebrewer first."

"And overall," he added, "the quality of homebrew I've been drinking (in New Jersey) lately has been really good."

One look at the way the Morris Area Society of Homebrewers (MASH) conducts its business (the first step in the brewing process is known as "mashing," hence the name), and it's easy to see why, at least here. Nearly 50 people from Morris and neighboring counties flocked to the Morris Tap and Grill in Randolph for the group's most recent monthly meeting, at which MASH co-founder Tom



Jambor delivered a detailed lecture on best practices for cleaning and sanitizing homebrewing equipment.

"The first thing I tell anyone who wants to get into brewing is that if you don't want to do dishes, you probably don't want to brew," Jambor said. "You can't cut any corners."

Some of the nuggets of advice offered that night no doubt proved invaluable to beginners – for example, steer clear of scented or fragrant detergents, Jambor suggested, in order to avoid having any of those smells or flavors leak into the beer. Each meeting features a focus on a single topic as well as talks about the intricacies of brewing certain types of beer (on this night, it was wheat beers).

Middlesex County also boasts its own homebrewing club, which easily ranks as one of the state's oldest – the

Woodbridge Homebrewers Ale and Lager Enthusiast Society, or WHALES, was founded in 1996 and meets monthly at J.J. Bitting's brewpub on Main Street in Woodbridge. And the area also is home to one of the region's fastest-growing homebrew supply outfits, Love2Brew on Livingston Avenue in North Brunswick.

Barely a year and a half after opening its doors, Love2Brew's inventory has grown fivefold, according to company President Ron Witkowski.

"We're doing well," Witkowski said. "I

can't complain."

In addition to selling ingredients – more than 70 different types of grain, 80 types of hops and 100 types of yeast – the company offers free monthly classes and unique content uploaded to its website daily, Witkowski said. Love2Brew ships to all 50 states and as far away as South Korea, he added, with all shipping on orders of \$75 or more free of charge.

Like Cask & Kettle, the company has started offering on-site brewing, with 65 gallons spread across 13 different batches quietly fermenting in a separate room early last week. (Witkowski advises homebrewers to develop a favorite recipe at home, then to come here to make a larger batch.)

The business plan was never just to sell ingredients and startup kits, which can cost less than \$100, but to create

a "homebrew culture," featuring ample connectivity in Central Jersey and beyond.

"(Brewing) is just like cooking a great meal. And it's super easy to brew," Witkowski said. "It's very easy to make a great beer."

Even New Jersey Craft Beer, an organization established to alert thirsty Garden State residents to events, products and releases involving commercially produced beer, has been getting in on the homebrewing fun.

Late last year, in cooperation with Natalie DeChico, New Jersey representative of Weyerbacher Brewing Co., and Vito Forte, owner of the Copper Mine Pub in North Arlington, the group sponsored "Queen of Hops," a ladies-only homebrewing competition.

"Since we received 56 entries, way more than we expected," the organization

reported after the judging event, "we decided to split the entries into two groups and award twice as many prizes and two honorable mentions."

The grand-prize winner was Heather DeGroot of South Brunswick, whose jalapeno saison immediately became the stuff of legend among fellow Garden State homebrewers – the legions of which continue to grow.

