

Brewing the good life

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Dan and Deb Carey find personal and professional satisfaction making their New Glarus specialty beers.

Dan Carey is living every professional brewmaster's dream. The former Anheuser-Busch production supervisor is now the co-owner and brewmaster of the New Glarus Brewing Co., of New Glarus, Wisconsin. He owes this dream job in roughly equal parts to his own brewing aptitude and to the fortitude and spunk of his wife, Deb Carey.

Deb, a Wisconsin native, was educated in Montana and Oregon, and started her first business at the age of 16. After college, she ran other businesses - a graphics and marketing firm in Montana, and an antiques company that imported furniture from Germany. Meanwhile, during the mid- to late 1980s, Dan worked in the U.S. microbrewing industry, and then took a post with Anheuser in 1990.

"Dan and I had always talked about starting a business together," Deb says, "and we were so immersed in the brewing business that it seemed like a natural. But we knew it was a very tough business, and we had seen the problems that some of our small brewer friends had experienced."

Those problems had been one of the reasons that Dan had left the micro segment to begin with. "When I went to work for Anheuser-Busch I was a bit disenchanted with the micro business," Dan recalls. "I saw people starting to cut corners because of inefficiencies of scale, cutting lagering times, making short-term decisions. So I went to A-B because they were number one. Unfortunately, to be successful there, I would have had to move around to places like Newark, New Jersey, and that wasn't what we had in mind for our daughters. My wife was from here in Wisconsin, and she wanted to come back. I'm the artistic type, and I like to create, and you just can't be as creative in a large brewery."

And so the Carey-Carey partnership was born. "It ended up as a decision based on desperation," Deb says. "We wanted to be in charge of our own lives. I happened to be married to a fabulous brewer, so why should he be working for someone else?"

In 1993, the Careys started their small brewery in New Glarus, Wisconsin, a quiet little town just south of Madison. The brewery end was handled by Dan, and the financing by Deb. "I'm very conservative and detail oriented," Dan says, "and I'm useless at talking to bankers. Deb is the entrepreneur, she has a vision and she thrives on taking calculated chances. She pushed to get a big bank loan, and made the whole thing happen."

The first incarnation of the New Glarus Brewing Company was very modest, and the company gradually built production to the 5000-barrel mark. But to keep production at that level, the brewers were working pretty long shifts. "We had a 20-barrel brewhouse that used a complicated mashing process," Dan recalls. "We were brewing three 700-gallon batches a day, four or five days a week. We really needed a bigger brewhouse, but we didn't have a lot of money to spend. We wanted something around 60-barrels, but we also wanted it to be beautiful. Fritz Maytag once said 'people want to believe that beer comes from a beautiful place' and I agree with that."

So as his brewing assistants labored five days a week, Dan traveled to Germany, searching for the perfect brewhouse. "We found a lot of 60-barrel brewhouses in Germany," he recalls, "but they were either worn out or they had design flaws. Then we found a 100-barrel brewhouse at the Rauh & Ploss Brewery in the city of Selb, in northern Bavaria. The brewery had shut down and the building had been vacant for a year. But the brewhouse was in great shape, used twice a week since 1962, and meticulously cared for. At first I didn't want it because I thought it was too big, but Deb thought it was a great buy."

In the event, the Careys took the plunge, paying \$24,000 for a copper brewhouse originally priced at \$100,000. "Deb turned out to be right," Dan says. "It allows us to be very efficient. Instead of brewing five days a week, we can brew two or three times a week. In the beginning we said we wanted to build our brewery as flit will be here after we're gone, and this is it. We could run this for 50 years."

The Careys bought used tankage for their expansion, picking up a couple of tanks from the defunct Aviator Ales brewery to replace their old dairy tanks, and then installing everything themselves. "We didn't hire engineers and architects," Dan says. "I did the engineering and Deb did the design, and we did most of the installation m-house. It was hard, and going to Germany to buy equipment is not for the faint-of-heart. It is a lot easier just to call JV Northwest and write them a check. But we did the whole thing for about \$285,000, so we were operational for about 20% of what other people spend."

The success of the installation surprised at least one industry expert. "This German brewing consultant kept calling us," Deb recalls. "He knew we had bought this brewhouse, and I guess he assumed we'd be in over our heads. When he would call, I'd tell him everything was fine, and that seemed to puzzle him. One day he actually showed up, out of the blue. He just couldn't believe that Dan was doing it himself. But Dan had installed 48 brewhouses for JV Northwest, plus our two, so it was a pretty familiar process for him."

Part of Deb's contribution was the design of the brewery buildings. "This building is our interpretation of a Franconian farmhouse-style brewery," she says. "I'm not an architect, so we made it simple, but we love German architecture, and wanted to build something like you'd find in the German countryside."

New Glares Brewing Co.'s European architecture fits perfectly in New Glarus, Wisconsin, a community that was settled in the 19th century by a group of Swiss immigrants. "The people in town have retained a lot of their customs and language," Deb says. "If you go into the post office, you can hear some of the older people taking in Switzer-Deutsch - many of the people in their 60s and 70s are very Swiss and proud of it. It's like a little time capsule - there have been academic studies done on this town - but they have been very open to us."

The townspeople haven't been the only ones to embrace New Glarus. As the company has grown, its beers are becoming known to beer enthusiasts all over the country. "I'm always shocked by the response we get from people," Deb says. "They come up to us at events and say 'You're my heroes'. They start chanting, and kiss my hand. There are a lot of people that get very emotional about beer."

Enthusiasts are particularly fanatical about the brewery's fruit beers. Although most of New Glarus' volume is in German-style lagers, Dan Carey has also specialized in spontaneously-fermented fruit beers, like its Belgian Red. This beer, which Dan Carey calls "a marriage of wine and beer" is made with whole cherries, Wisconsin wheat, Belgian barley and Hallertau hops. It is lagered in oak wine vats and aged for a full year. "We may be known in Wisconsin for our lagers," Dan says, "but outside the state, people know our fruit beers. The Belgian Red has won every contest it's entered."

As Belgian Red has become a cult icon for beer aficionados all over the U.S., it has also won notice from the professional brewing community. Belgian Red has won numerous awards during its relatively brief existence, swiftly becoming one of the most-decorated American microbrewery brands. It made the 1995 Wine Enthusiast list of top ten beers, and took a 1996 silver medal at the World Beer Cup; a 1996 gold medal at the Great American Beer Festival; and platinum medals for world champion fruit beer in the 1995, 1996 and 1997 World Beer Championships. In addition, Belgian Red was named World Champion Specialty Beer in 1996 and 1997 at the Brewing Industry International Awards in Burton-Upon-Trent, England. This last award was especially sweet for Deb and Dan. "It was like winning an Oscar," Deb says. "Getting nominated

for an award was honor enough, since we were competing with 850 beers entered by 200 breweries from around the world."

For some of the international brewers, it may be startling to be upstaged by a tiny Wisconsin brewery that is just six years old, brewing with a used brewhouse that was state-of-the-art in 1962.

According to Dan, the New Glarus brewhouse was designed to make traditional German-style beers with decoction mashes. "It's not as efficient as a 1999 brewhouse," Dan says, "but a lot of that has to do with subtleties of design. We get 97% extract, where a modern brewhouse can get 99%. We have a very good mill; it's about 65 years old, and made in Dresden before World War Two. We do a decoction mash, and it helps that we get good malt. We get it primarily from Schreier, and we pay a premium for less-modified, low-protein malt."

Another key area for New Glarus has been packaging, where the brewery has sought to maximize shelf life. "The shelf life of our beer is three months," Dan says. "We tell everyone to refrigerate it, but we know in reality that it might not be refrigerated. I've seen our beer a year old in accounts, and I think that is common. We don't have the clout or the resources to pull it. So we can get upset or we can work to extend shelf life. We have worked to get real low air, .3 ml oxygen for a 12-oz. bottles, and we pasteurize it. No matter what you do, though, there's some tavern out there with a bottle that's a year and a half old. We know 99% of our beer in the trade is fresh, but that 1% scares us."

New Glarus purchased their pasteurizer used from the Frankenmuth Brewery. "All our lagers are flash-pasteurized," Dan says, "and the rest is bottle conditioned."

Other equipment in the brewery has come from all over. "We've got a line from G. Heileman, a filler from a German brewer, a labeler from a Canadian brewery, and a filter from a winery in New Jersey," Dan says. "We even got a conveyor from a distributor."

Most unusual are the 100-barrel wine vats, Italian-made and lined with Yugoslavian oak. Wooden vessels are a rare sight in a modern American brewery, but these vessels are key to making the spontaneously-fermented fruit beers like Belgian Red. "Our fruit beers are a small but important part of our business," Dan says. "People are always saying micros should try to create the \$5.00 bottle of beer. Well, our fruit beers are going for \$7.50 to \$10.00 for a 750-ml champagne bottle."

In addition to the Belgian Red, New Glarus also makes Raspberry and Apple ales. The company's primary lager beers are Uff-Da Bock and Edel-Pils. In addition, the brewery makes Norski Honey Bock, Solstice Weiss, Staghorn Oktoberfest, Snowshoe Ale and Coffee Stout. An traditional unfiltered "special invitation" Zwickel beer is sometimes made, dosed with yeast in the bottle for a secondary fermentation.

According to Dan, all his beers share a common theme. "My philosophy is to aim for the drinkability of a large brewery, and the flavor of a micro," Dan Carey says. "The big guys make a very drinkable beer, while some of the microbeers, you're done after a pint. We want to make beer that is subtle, and we want to brew what we like to drink. It's got to be good, or I'm not going to waste my time."

Most of the brands are priced in the \$5.99 range, and the company depends on word of mouth and personal contact for many sales. "We're doing pull marketing," Deb says. "We approach the consumer first. We do keg tappings, beer tastings, tours, talks to local groups, you name it. We figure that every single person who drinks our beer is important. For us, one person is equal to the population of a small city for the big guys. So I'm happy to spend 10-15 minutes talking to a guy at a festival. If we make a connection with that person, we have a customer."

Deb is now working to make New Glarus a force in its region. "We'll stay local," she says. "We do ship some beer to Chicago, but we're one of the few Wisconsin breweries that doesn't ship very much out-of-state. We think local identity is part of our appeal."

"It's a hard business," Dan observes. "It's difficult to make beer day-in and day-out, and it's not real profitable unless you're big. But it's a good livelihood, and we can nurture a passion. We make money, but our lifestyle won't include Mercedes-Benz vehicles any time soon."

For Deb and Dan, though, the aesthetics of their old German brewkettle surpass a shiny SL 500 anytime. Standing in the brewhouse, Deb smiles at her husband. "Life doesn't get any better than this," she says.

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