

The Art in Brewing

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Aesthetics are part of the brew at Ommegang. Brewery Ommegang is a gem of a Belgian farmhouse brewery, making a line of extraordinary, authentic Belgian beers. It is housed in a classic Belgian farm complex, at the base of the rolling hills of a former hop farm. On arrival before the gates, one is transported for a moment into rural Europe. Unaccountably, this paragon among Belgian breweries is located in Cooperstown, New York, that most American of small towns.

Why Cooperstown? "My husband Don was a pitcher in college," says co-founder Wendy Littlefield, "so for his 30th birthday we came out to baseball fantasy camp in Cooperstown. We fell in love with the town, and found such a sense of history here."

At the time, the couple was working in New York City, with a Belgian beer importing business as a sideline.

"When we decided we wanted to start a brewery," Wendy says, "we did a survey of possible places to build it. Cooperstown won out--there is a history of hop cultivation, and in this town, a Belgian brewery fits in pretty well. It might be a little Disneylandish if we had put it elsewhere."

Cooperstown, of course, already has some Disneyland elements. The town is Mecca for baseball fans, and beer fits in well with the ballpark ethos, although nothing like Ommegang's brews has ever been poured in the bleachers. The Hall of Fame draws throngs of visitors, and there is a natural spillover when people hear that there is a small brewery nearby. This has proved a boon for spreading the word about Ommegang, according to Wendy. "We knew tourism would be a factor in building a successful brewery," she notes, "we just didn't realize how much."

The brewery is built on a foundation of references that may be obscure to an American audience. The name Ommegang, for instance, refers to an annual festival in Brussels that celebrates the accession of Charles V. This was considered a high point in the Flemish Renaissance. You may not have read about that in history class, but it was a very big deal for Belgians. Then there are the beers--richly flavorful ales with names like Hennepin and Rare Vos, mostly packaged corked wine-style bottles.

Ommegang is certainly not a conventional American microbrewery, but the Belgian flavor of the place is quite authentic. Partners in the venture include a group of artisanal Belgian brewers, including the makers of Duvel, Scaldis and Affligem.

Don and Wendy met these Belgian brewers through their beer importing venture, VanBerg & DeWulf, which has handled many archetypal Belgian brands over the years.

In fact, Don and Wendy were connoisseurs of Belgian culture long before Brewery Ommegang was a gleam in their respective eyes. They fell in love with the country while living and traveling there in the early 1980s. On their return to America, they wanted to bring something of Belgium back with them, and thus started their beer importing venture. It wasn't until the mid 1990s that they decided to actually begin making their own.

"We knew people liked Belgian beer," Wendy says, "and the import business was up strongly. We believed that a Belgian-style brewery in the U.S. could serve as a gateway to the Belgian category. So we told our Belgian brewer friends that they needed a beachhead in America, a brewery producing very traditional Belgian beers at an affordable price. The premise was that this would help bring people to the category."

"In practice I think that it is working," Littlefield says. "People are trying Ommegang beers, and then moving on to other strong ales and lambics. We certainly don't want to poach, by stealing someone who was drinking Chimay. I don't think we do, because we're so small. We just want to open people to the idea of Belgian beer."

The model for Ommegang and its beers is found in the Belgian tradition of small farmhouse breweries. "In Belgium every early brewer was a monk or a farmer," Littlefield says. "We're trying to bring back the idea of a rural brewing tradition."

Ommegang's setting is certainly just right. The brewery is situated on a rolling 136-acre former hop farm, not far from the banks of the Susquehanna River, and just south of Cooperstown village. The buildings are set on a meadow; with a wooded ridge rising just behind them.

The main brewery building is a low white-painted structure, with an arched central gateway. It was designed with input by Littlefield, who studied architecture in college. She says she drew her inspiration from remembrances of many farmsteads that the couple had visited during their sojourns in Europe, "On a trip to Wallonia and Flanders, we took pictures of our favorite farmstead breweries," she recalls. "Most of them are long, low buildings, with a central arch. We wanted to incorporate those elements into our brewery, using local architects."

The result is a functional but graceful structure influenced by 19th century Hainaut farmsteads. "The building is quite simple and rustic," she says, "but there are many 'guild-like' touches throughout."

Visitors drive through the central gateway into the field behind the brewery. Within the archway are great wooden doors. These are fixed in place with hand-wrought iron hinges in the shape of hop vines, made by a local ironworker of Dutch extraction. An expanse of large cathedral-style paving stones carpet the foyer, and there is a niche for a statue of St. Arnold, the patron of Belgian brewers. On one side of the archway is the production area and a small brewery store; on the other is the packaging department. The brewery's administrative offices are on the second floor.

The brewhouse itself was set up with the assistance of the Belgian partners, and a Belgian brewer named Bert DeWit helped set things in motion. Now the brewing staff is made up of young American brewers with a background in microbeers.

Assistant brewer Kevin Davis, for example, was a former homebrewer who recently completed the Master Brewers program at the University of California-Davis.

Davis reports that the Ommegang brewers are getting fairly average efficiencies from their Falco brewhouse, which is to be expected, given the high gravity of Ommegang's beers.

The most unusual feature of the brewery is an open fermenter, in the Belgian style. "At first I thought Don was being flowery when he said open fermenters were good for volatizing aromas," Davis says, "but the system grows on you. You can really tell what is going on. It's a hands-on way of working with your beer."

Along the way, Davis and the other brewers have picked up the arcane aspects of Belgian beer science. "American brewing schools teach you to make very clean beer," he says. "In school we learned to suppress ester formation, all the flavors that here we want to promote."

Davis reports that fermentations generally take five days, and when the beer hits final gravity it is chilled down, and transferred into cylindrical Falco tanks for about two weeks. "A lot of suspended yeast drops out," he says,

"which will take care of flavor maturation, and the diacetyl is reduced. After we lager it for about two weeks, we use a DE filter to remove all the yeast. The high-gravity beers beat up the yeast pretty well, and the filter will help reduce haze formation. Our beers aren't super-filtered, so sometimes you get a chill haze in Hennepin."

Hennepin is one of the first two beers made by Ommegang, and is a golden colored, peppery saison ale. The flagship brew (pictured, far left) is Ommegang, a strong red ale of 8% alcohol-by-volume. The most recent addition is Rare Vos, an ale of the "Brabant" style. "Brabant ale is not one of the strong beers," Davis reports. "The Belgians have a light drinking beer, like we Americans, and that's their Brabant."

Last year, its second year of brewing, Ommegang sold just under 3,000 barrels, probably close to capacity for the little plant. "We just completed an expansion," Wendy says. "Moving up from 40,000 to 50,000 cases. We're now selling coast-to-coast, in New York, the Eastern Seaboard, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, California. The advantage we had is that we already had established relationships with distributors. We knew whether they would take the beer or not. Although we started selling these beers right as the micro slowdown hit, we weren't viewed as a micro, so it didn't hurt us."

Interestingly, the local market for Ommegang's Belgian-style beers seems to be growing as well. The brewery recently produced a batch of Hennepin with local hops to sell at the Cooperstown Farmer's museum. It proved a big hit. "The degree to which local people like the beers has been interesting," Wendy says. "I don't think that people in this area had much exposure to these beer styles. I think in general that the whole phenomenon of Belgian beers is just beginning in catch on in this country."

This phenomenon recently got a little push from an unexpected source. Martha Stewart and beer have rarely been mentioned in the same sentence, but when the doyenne of American homemaking needed a beer to use in her cooking program, she chose one from Ommegang. The television exposure triggered a spate of calls to the brewery, including one from a major chain buyer. "When we started brewing we wanted to help people disassociate beer and bathing suits," Wendy says. With expanding consumer interest (and Martha's imprimatur) Ommegang is at least a couple of steps closer to that goal.

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