

New Year, New Beer: New microbrew adds to growing Orono beer scene

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Located practically underground on Mill St., you might drive past it if you aren't careful. But take the granite steps down below Verve restaurant and you'll find it's a warm, welcoming place, where everybody really does know your name. There are handcrafted wooden tables and benches, a copper bar top and vinyl spinning long into the night. Take a seat, if you're lucky enough to find one. Tonight, it's standing room only.

It's Orono Brewing Company (OBC), brainchild of husband and wife, and business partners, Abe and Heather Furth, who own a string of successful establishments in Orono. On Jan. 1, they rung in the new year with their business partner, Mark Horton, by launching their latest endeavor.

This is the trio's second business in Orono. The three own Woodman's Bar and Grill, which opened in 2005. The Furths also own Verve, which opened in Orono in 2008. For them, a brewery symbolizes the future of their brand and the future of the town as a whole. But they also just love what they do.

"We all love beer and it's certainly a part of bringing Woodman's into the future, too. We want to keep our brand strong," Heather Furth said.

Downtown Orono has seen a boom in business in recent years. But since the opening of the Black Bear Microbrew in 2004, Orono has made itself a stop on the map of Maine's growing beer scene.

"When we opened Woodman's, the only places to hang out were Bear Brew, Margarita's and Pat's," Abe Furth said.

But now, with several more restaurants in town and two microbreweries within walking distance of each other, Orono is picking up steam in a growing market.

And what makes Orono's beer so special? According to those involved in the scene, its emphasis on using local ingredients whenever possible.

"It's definitely important for me to use the best ingredients we can get," Asa Marsh-Sachs, the brewmaster at OBC, said. "If you really use the right ingredients, it makes everything better."

And Marsh-Sachs would know; he's been managing home brew stores for eight years, most recently at Central Street Farmhouse in Bangor.

And where do those ingredients come from? It could be the pilsner malt from Germany in their kolsch, or it could be the flaked oats from Maine Grains in Skowhegan, which add a rich, creaminess to their Excursion stout. Spent grains from the brewing process are reused to make the brewery's pretzels, and extra spent grains are sent to Siberia Farms in Hermon, Maine to use as cow feed. Milk from these cows is used to make the feta for the brewery's flatbread pizzas.

With an emphasis on sustainable, locally-grown ingredients, Horton is optimistic the brewing industry will greatly impact Maine for the better.

"There wasn't the demand and there wasn't people producing ingredients in Maine 15-20 years ago, but with the brewery boom that's going on," Horton said, "There's going to be more farmers growing hops, there's going to be more malt houses popping up."

This isn't a new trend, however. The Black Bear Microbrew in Orono has been using local ingredients whenever possible for years. This includes using locally-grown hops when they are available, straight from the farm to the fermenter.

"Our main focus is quality," Tim Gallon, owner and brewmaster at Black Bear, said. "We put the beer first."

Since opening in 2004, Black Bear has long satisfied the desire for quality beer in town and spearheaded the modern brewing movement in town. But with the opening of OBC, the thought of competition may raise some tension. But neither brewer seems concerned. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

"It's nice to have other breweries," Gallon said. "For the longest time we were practically the farthest brewery north."

"We found that the brewery business is a rare business where you actually see [competitors] as people that are helping each other out and supporting each other," Abe Furth said. "There's a good feeling of camaraderie, just wanting all those businesses to grow and grow the scene."

It's true. When Gallon was a part-owner of the Bear Brew Pub more than a decade ago, he hired Abe Furth as a bouncer. He eventually worked his way up to bar manager. After years of honing his craft, Abe and Heather Furth, were able to open Woodman's.

And on OBC's opening day, Gallon was surely in line.

“We strive to improve Orono all the time,” Heather Furth said, speaking about the town’s recent revitalization. “I think it’s good for Orono in general to have more businesses.”

They’re all proud of their work.

“I’m really thankful to be in a place that supports us,” Abe Furth said as he looked around at a full house.

On a cold and snowy Thursday night, the Draft House was completely filled to its 30-person capacity. Students and locals sat drinking Marsh-Sachs’ latest creation, the Johnny Mac Robust Porter, fruity and full-bodied. There were smiles and laughter as patrons played board games to the vintage sounds of vinyl. Small but warm lights dimly lit the red brick walls adorned with custom posters and illustrations.

Many students were out that night, and they couldn’t wait to get a taste of this new attraction to town.

“With the music and the atmosphere, it’s pretty cool, it’s relaxed,” said Zach Lutick, 23, an elementary education student at the University of Maine.

While others, like Courtney Wrenn, 25, who traveled from New Hampshire, couldn’t even tell the the brewery was new.

“It’s nice to have a local brewery when you’re traveling through town,” Wrenn said.

Abe Furth ran the show that night, moving quickly between the taps to the taproom, chatting with the regulars, taking orders and trying to enjoy his own Johnny Mac. He danced behind the bar as he surveyed the crowd, a smile on his face and pride in his eyes.

“I very rarely wake up and don’t feel excited to work,” he said. “This has been such a fun opening for us and we just want to enjoy it.”