

Bright Tanks:

GREAT BASIN BREWING CO.

By Joan Atkinson

Nevada is called the Silver State because it was silver and mining that originally put the state on the map and got it into the Union. Mining, geology and the rugged outdoors continue to be defining features of the state, so it seems only right and proper that the oldest brewery is run by a guy who decided to give up geology and a career as a mining engineer in order to brew beer.

It all started when Tom Young acquired a taste for European beer and he began homebrewing in the 1970s in order to get that great taste, save money and have fun. "I was fascinated by the brewing science and the different flavors....

I just did it for relaxation. When the kids were babies, when my wife was working, I did most of my homebrewing, because I had to stay home and watch them," said Young.

When he moved to the northern Nevada area, he hooked up with a group of homebrewers, namely, future partner Eric McClary. Eric and some friends had

started the Washoe Zephyr Zymurgists. The Zymurgists held competitions and were instrumental in a brewing competition being included at the Nevada State Fair. Tom and Eric tweaked their recipes, entered competitions and eventually became two of the biggest award winners in the history of the American Homebrewers Association.

Then, Tom lost his job as a mining engineer when the mine in Loyalton, California closed. Since he didn't want to move his young family to mining districts in South America, Tom started looking around for a new career and decided that this funny hobby of his just might be the way to go. The only problem? Brewing was illegal in Nevada.

In the 1980s, the law was changed to allow brewing in the Virginia City Historic District, in a commercial building, in a building that had once been a brewery. Only two buildings fit that criteria and one was the firehouse. A few years later, the laws were changed again, this time to allow brewing in redevelopment districts and eventually the location requirement



Tom Young, Head Dude, Great Basin Brewing Company

was eliminated.

Tom and his partners first talked with the people at the redevelopment agency in Reno, who were dumbfounded by the idea that someone would actually want to make a living selling beer and food, while the folks in Sparks were much more receptive to the idea. Then the partners had to convince a bank to lend them money for a business that wasn't found anywhere else in the state. "We ended up applying to every single bank in the State of Nevada for a loan. We got turned down by every single bank." With the help of additional partners, belief in the product, hard work and determination, the Great Basin Brewing Company opened in December 1993 and sold out of beer within weeks. They've been brewing at a break-neck pace every since.

Tom and Eric took those award-winning recipes from their homebrewing days, some of them Tom's, some of them Eric's, and brought them to the big tanks. For instance, the recipe for the award-winning *Wild Horse Ale* is based on a recipe of Tom's, while the *Cerveza Chile Beso*, a multiple GABF gold

medal winner, is Eric's recipe. Most are a combination of the two.

Tom readily admits that Eric was the real innovator. The *Harvest Ale* is one of Eric's pet recipes, relying on local ingredients such as honey, pine nuts, sagebrush and juniper berries for its distinctive taste. It's nicknamed "Nevada in a Glass".

But the innovator is no longer with us. While on vacation in July, 2002, Eric, who suffered from Parkinson's disease, disappeared along a Michigan river after expressing an interest in going swimming.

Now 11 years in business, Great Basin is the oldest brewery in the state. In that time, Tom Young and his partners have changed how craft beer and its production is perceived by the Reno/Sparks beer drinking public.

They've led the way in brewing interesting and distinctive beer, all the while having a good time, making an impact on the community and spreading the word about the wonders of a well-brewed beer. "We've certainly shown, with us and the other breweries in town, that people are here and willing to drink beer."

Great Basin isn't just about the beer, though. It also boasts great pub food, some dishes using the beer, such as in the beer cheese soup, while other items complement the beer, such as the sausage platter. The garlic fries are a big favorite, as are the beer-battered fish and chips.

The beers are available at the brewpub or can be found on tap at a variety of locations throughout the region. None of the beer, however, is bottled on a large scale. Tom hopes to upgrade the small bottling system he has and then sell more of the specialty beers, such as the holiday ales. These would be available only at the brewery.

As for the future, it's just going to be more of the same. A recent remodel expanded the

restaurant area to better accommodate a stage for the many bands that perform at the Basin. The brewing area, located behind glass walls at one end of the brewpub, was enlarged to accommodate seven fermentation tanks.

During the summer of 2004, the millionth pint of *Ichthyosaur Pale Ale* was sold. The prize was singularly Nevadan—a long weekend in a motor home at the Berlin-Ichthyosaur State Park in central Nevada. The *Ichthyosaur* is Nevada's state fossil and it's somehow ironic that a geologist turned brewer has named his best selling beer after a giant fossilized fish. And throughout northern Nevada was heard the cry of "Gimme an lcky!"

The prize for the purchaser of the millionth pint was singularly Nevadan — a long weekend in a motor home at the Berlin-Ichthyosaur State Park in central Nevada.