

Westmount Profile: Charles Bierbrier

Building a dream

BY LAUREEN SWEENEY

Driven by a passion for beer and a love of business, Charles Bierbrier has single-handedly built his own brewery from scratch and into a thriving operation.

In less than two years, the life-long Westmounter has converted an abandoned warehouse into a business that supplies Montreal stores and bars, and is now shipping to many regions of Quebec in a competitive and hot market.

“The more the competition plays tough,” he says, “the stronger I come back.”

At age 31, Charles is already past president of the Rotary Club of Westmount, a current director of the Westmount Municipal Association and the president of the McGill Young Alumni.

He holds an MBA from the John Molson School of Business (Concordia) and has played trumpet – another passion – at the Montreal Jazz Festival.

Charles loves brewing so much that he refers to it as a “life-path” rather than career. He initially intended it to be a retirement hobby.

“But it’s a good thing I decided to do it now,” he explains, “because it requires so much strength and energy.”

Jeans-clad in the brewery office, Charles has just helped unload a large truck delivering empties to Bierbrier Brewing at the foot of Guy St. off William.

He keeps a suit and tie handy for visiting clients and changes clothes at a rate worthy of Superman.

Guiding the visitor through the brew house, he proudly describes the process, gesturing to the stainless-steel tanks custom made by a leading manufacturer in

PEI. “We do everything in-house,” he says.

And until relatively recently, the word “we” has meant Charles himself.

Drawing up his own business plan, he hunted down and adapted the building, helped pour the concrete and install the state-of-the-art equipment, and worked through a long regulatory process to obtain his permits.

For the first six months of operation, “I was it,” he recalls.

“I’d spend the day brewing, then hop in the car and head for the bars to try and sell it. And only after that could I get to the record keeping.

“I had a cell phone and a beach chair. That was my office. But I had a brewery. And I was happy.”

The business grew quickly through word-of-mouth.

Soon he was able to hire a brewmaster, and then add a sales team and other assistants.

Since Day 1 in October 2005, Charles has built a team of 10, and quadrupled output. He considers himself a “downtown brewer” rather than a micro-brewer. “We are an independent local brewery – and probably the smallest in the province.”

He’s also proud that Bierbrier ale was selected for inclusion in the 2007 edition of *Le Petit Debeur*.

“We’re not a household name yet, but we will be!” he says, breaking into a wide smile.

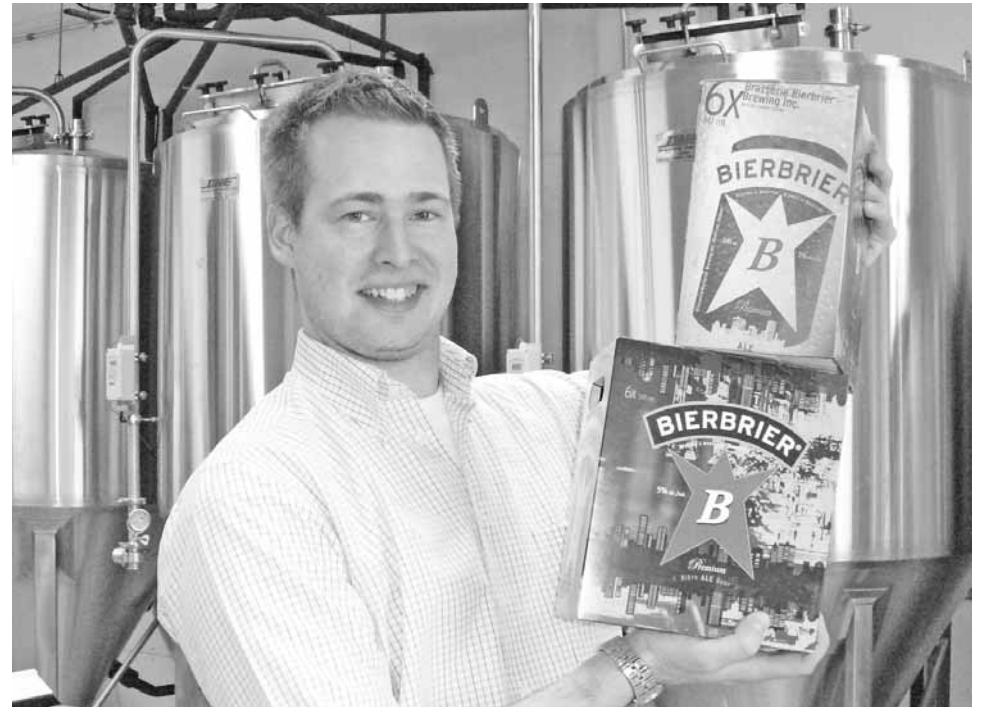
The recipe is his own, a golden ale that he describes as “very smooth, well balanced, refreshing and thirst-quenching.”

With the start of the barbecue season, Charles is already receiving requests for individual kegs.

At first, he says, he wondered how he would ever lift the filled kegs, each weighing about 150 pounds. “Now I can hoist them over my head!”

The entire brewing process takes place in about 1,000 square feet – a concrete room specially built to create a sterile environment. This brew house, as it is called, contains large, custom-made stainless steel kettles and fermenters, pumps and other equipment.

“A large part of the day is devoted to cleaning,” Charles says. “Every-



Charles Bierbrier

thing is sterilized at the end of the day and again in the morning.”

“I had a passion for business,” he remembers. So after graduating from Selwyn House in 1993, and studying commerce at Marianopolis, he obtained a BA in economics at McGill in 1998. He was undergraduate president of the McGill chapter of Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity,

which he now serves as alumni advisor.

“I’ve always been very involved in community leadership,” he says.

After graduation, Charles worked briefly in banking at the Royal Bank before taking the Canadian Securities Course and starting to build a client base at the brokerage firm of Merrill Lynch.

“I was the rookie, and loved it. But one morning

I woke up and said I’m leaving to do an MBA and later return to corporate finance.

“But the idea of brewing kept coming to me as a life path. It reached the point where I was so obsessed that I had to do it.”

Armed with his new MBA from Concordia, he began to build his dream.

“There’s no guide to setting up a brewery. No one is there to help you in such a competitive market. You have to do it yourself.”

“I knew what I was getting into,” he says, “but you can’t stop when something goes wrong like construction delays or missing machine parts.

“My parents (Ed Bierbrier and Anne-

Marie Larue Bierbrier) played an important role in encouraging me to just take a deep breath and move forward.”

Despite working long hours, Charles still makes time to go out evenings with friends and attend events including a number of promotional nights and beer tastings.

Friends are important to Charles. Many of them – some, doctors and lawyers – helped him with the construction and installation of equipment.

“They used to joke that it would have cost me a fortune if I’d had to pay their professional fees.”

Charles says he is always mindful that the business comes first. “In such a hot business, there’s no room for error. But I’ve always regarded business as an art, just as brewing is.

“So being able to bring the two together to create something of quality is indeed a dream.”

How it’s brewed

The two-week process starts from the time the malted barley is poured into the mash tun. This is a large hot water tank or kettle. During this first pre-brewing step, hot water is poured on the grain in a similar way to brewing tea.

Once the desired rich liquid is obtained, it is transferred to a brewing kettle and hops added. The result then goes to fermenting tanks where the addition of yeast converts the sugar into alcohol.

After the yeast is filtered out, carbon dioxide is added and the beer is bottled or kegged.



Filling a keg in the brew house of Bierbrier Brewing Inc., 310 Guy St.