

The Gazette

He's living up to his name

Some things are just meant to be. Charles Bierbrier, whose last name means 'brewer of beer,' always sensed that he wanted to brew ale for a living. Now, he's doing just that with his own microbrewery

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Charles Bierbrier knows that there's something eerily fascinating about how he came to own a micro-brewery that's making a name for itself among Montreal beer aficionados.

For years, he couldn't explain why, but he sensed that he wanted to brew beer for a living.

It's not that there was a family business beckoning to him. His father is a lawyer and his mother works in real estate. And Bierbrier studied economics at McGill before heading into a banking job, followed by a gig as a stock broker at Merrill Lynch.

But somewhere in the back of his mind, he imagined himself as a brewer.

"What's strange is that in German, my family name means 'brewer of beer,' " he said.

Even stranger is the serendipitous way in which he began brewing beer as a hobby.

"I was walking along a street when I was 17 and I saw a store selling home beer-brewing supplies," he said.

"I bought some and took up brewing beer at home as a hobby. I'd go to school during the week and brew beer on weekends."

He loved the stock market, however, so after university, Bierbrier launched a career as a stock broker and figured that if he were ever to become a brewer, it would be as a retirement business.

If he had an inkling that the business would eventually choose him, he didn't consciously acknowledge it.

"I would spend my vacations going to beer conferences," he said. "I had no timeline for establishing a brewery, but the hobby was becoming more of a passion."

Still, Bierbrier was on a corporate career path. From 2001 to 2003, he studied toward an MBA at the John Molson School of Business.

"While I was in school, I started to think of opening a brewery," he said. "After graduation, I went back to a finance job in banking and lasted six months."

The following year, he opened the microbrewery he had long dreamed of. The appropriately named Brasserie Bierbrier Inc. occupies 2,000 square feet in a historic industrial building at the foot of Guy St. Three-and-a-half years into the venture, the operation is bursting at the seams and Bierbrier says his plan is to expand into adjacent space.

"I took a course in Ste. Hyacinthe to become a master brewer, but when I started the business, my friends thought I was bonkers," he said. "They said: 'You have an MBA and a great job. Why would you leave it?' But my parents were really encouraging."

Launching the business proved to be hard slogging, and for the first few months he worked alone.

The first hurdle involved getting the right permits from three levels of government.

"To get permits to brew beer, you have to install the equipment and do a test brew. So for one full year, I had the equipment and was renting space, but couldn't yet get licensed. So I couldn't make money."

And the equipment alone represented a large cash outlay, the amount of which Bierbrier will not divulge.

"I bought all the equipment from a company in Prince Edward Island," he said. "It was all custom-built and I worked exhaustively with the designers and engineers to tweak the equipment to suit my needs. The inspectors who looked at the premises were very impressed with it."

By October 2005, Bierbrier was in business as a one-man show.

"I would brew the beer in the mornings, then deliver it in the afternoons. In the evenings, I'd visit bars and restaurants to sell the product."

At first, restaurateurs were reluctant to buy the beer.

"No one wanted to be the first to sell it. They'd ask: 'Who else is selling your beer?' But eventually, I got a client and it grew from there," he said.

Bierbrier also realized within a couple of months that he could not sustain growth by working alone.

"I hired a brew master so I could focus on marketing," he said. "And right after that, the team grew to seven people. But I still do the odd delivery or unload pallets of grain."

Bierbrier set his sights on Montreal restaurants and bars as his key market.

"This is a premium beer that has no additives or preservatives and it's unpasteurized, so we've pitched it to restaurants."

The company uses Canadian malted barley and several specialty grains from Europe.

The process of producing the beer is labour intensive.

"We have to ensure that every batch is the same, so we analyze samples every day," he said. "And once a month, we send samples to an external lab for analysis."

Among the 250 establishments that offer the golden ale are Liverpool House, Garde Manger, Wunderbar, Bistro on the Avenue and the Monkland Tavern, along with a few upscale supermarkets and specialty food stores.

"The competition in premium beers is ferocious, but we've differentiated ourselves in that it's a local brew and we offer service," Bierbrier said.

The company is small enough that Bierbrier answers his own telephone and makes calls to his clients "like an old-fashioned milkman."

So far, the product is sold locally in Montreal and some is shipped to Quebec City. Despite the fact that U.S. distributors have expressed an interest in having it across the border, Bierbrier is cautious about expanding too quickly.

"We'll look at that down the line," he said.

The design of the packaging includes the Montreal skyline and a collage of the city's streets and buildings to emphasize the local nature of the product.

There's an interesting twist to Bierbrier's story that suggests that maybe brewing beer is in the blood.

"I was doing some research on my family at the Bibliothèque Nationale and learned that my great-grandfather, who immigrated to Montreal at the turn of the last century, had been a tavern owner in Europe," Bierbrier said.

"In Montreal, he opened a store on Notre Dame St. called Canada Liquor store, which he closed when the liquor industry was nationalized in the 1920s. My great-grandfather then went into real estate."

But if there's a beer-brewing gene, Charles Bierbrier has it. And the name to go with it.