

Wine & Spirits

L.A. brew, worldly taste

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.
Author: Charles Perry
Date: Mar 1, 2006
Start Page: F.1

MICHAEL Bowe leans over a 650-gallon tank, pouring green pellets into boiling wort (pronounced "wert"). That's the sweet extract of barley malt that turns into beer. Right now, it just looks like a lot of insanely boiling latte.

"This will be Abbey Ale, my Belgian-style ale," Bowe says fondly. "The Germans make great beer. The Belgians are like Germans on psychedelics -- they do all sorts of crazy things, like putting special brewing sugar in beer at the end to bump up the gravity [alcohol]."

Those crazy Belgians! At his Angel City Brewing Co. in Torrance, Bowe makes rather classical, perfectionist beers, but at the same time he does have a certain fascination with the wild side. When he was a home brewer, he sometimes made basil-flavored beer or stripped the candy canes off the Christmas tree and put them in a brew just to see what would happen.

It was experience not wasted. "I've tried so many malts and hops and things," he says, "these days I can just taste a beer and tell you how it was made."

But here's a really crazy thing. Bowe's Angel City is one of just eight lonely microbreweries in Los Angeles County. That's well below what you'd expect, given that L.A. is one of the top beer markets in the country. (Orange County has 14.)

A recent start-up, Angel City has begun to have a presence in Southern California. On tap, Bowe's brews have won a foothold in beer-oriented restaurants such as Traxx in Union Station downtown and Spitfire Grill in Santa Monica, and the bottled versions are in some liquor stores and upscale market chains such as Bristol Farms and Whole Foods.

Bowe has been selling beer commercially since 1997, but only in the last 18 months has he graduated to owning a professional brewing facility -- which he bought on EBay. (Yes, you can buy breweries online.)

Owning his own brewery has given him more capacity, up to 10,000 barrels a year. Equally important is the new bottling line he has put in, replacing the small, labor-intensive, "punishingly bad" system that came with the brewery.

"Eighty percent of beer sales is bottles," Bowe says. "An all- draft house misses a large segment of the market."

And for a beer guy, there's the important respect factor. "Some other microbreweries used to think of me as not legitimate," he says, "because I was just a 'contract brewer.' Not the bigger microbreweries, because they knew I was developing a brand."

*

Award winner

BEFORE going commercial, Bowe was one of the top home beer makers in the state. He was named California Home Brewer of the Year in 1995 and 1996, meaning that he had won the most ribbons in the three major California home brew competitions.

Beer wasn't his original career plan. He started out with an art degree from UC Davis and moved to Southern California in 1976 to get involved in Hollywood, where he worked in studio lighting for 12 years and tried his hand at writing screenplays. He also discovered the saxophone and in 2004 issued a jazz album, "Cole Porter De- Constructed," on the Angel City Jazz label.

But he got tired of freelance work and the Hollywood life, so he became a builder, starting as an apprentice carpenter. He got his contractor's license in 1988, the same year he married his boss' sister.

"When my wife was eight months pregnant," he says, "I saw an ad for a home brew kit and thought, 'That sounds cool.' " Anybody who knows a home brewer has heard of a similar watershed moment. Bowe sent off for the kit and made a batch.

When he decided to make another, he went to the venerable Home Wine, Beer and Cheesemaking Shop in Woodland Hills for materials. That day the shop happened to be hosting a meeting of the Maltose Falcons, the oldest home brewing club in the country, and Bowe fell straight into the bubbling L.A. home brew scene.

Soon he decided to make all-grain beer, rather than using the malt extract with which beginners are satisfied. This means, in effect, making your own malt extract direct from the barley, a process that involves a surprising number of steps of soaking at precise temperatures and laboriously filtering the result.

It's more difficult and there are a number of steps where the process can go wrong, but it gives you the same precise control over your product that a master brewer has. Bowe was clearly getting serious about his beer.

The second year Bowe was Home Brewer of the Year, he mentioned to the head of sales at Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., sponsor of the award, that he was planning to start his own commercial microbrewery. Steve Harrison immediately proceeded to give him a lot of practical advice on the start-up process.

Abashed, Bowe reminded him that once he opened, Angel City and Sierra Nevada were going to be competitors. Harrison replied, "When we started out, Fritz Maytag [owner of Anchor Brewing Co.] gave us a lot of help. We're just paying that back."

"There's incredible camaraderie in this scene," says Bowe.

*

Samples of brew

HIS first step was to get a Type 23 (microbrewery) business license; in the absence of a proper brewery of his own, he got it for his little 15-gallon home system. Then he took prospective customers samples of his home brew, telling them this was what his product was going to taste like -- and got his first 10 accounts that way.

But Bowe didn't plan to go commercial with his home system, not when most bars wanted 13.2-gallon kegs. He contracted with the brewery at Alpine Village in Torrance to make his recipes, and officially went commercial on St. Patrick's Day, 1997.

That brewery, built in 1988 to complete the German motif at the Alpine Village complex of shops and restaurants, had suffered business troubles, and by 1997 was mostly contracting to make beer for other people. "But I loved the place," Bowe says. "It's a well set up, proper lager brewery. When I was in a position to expand, I even offered the owner \$100,000 for it, but he wanted \$350,000."

In July 2004, an employee at the brewery tipped him off that it had just been listed on EBay. Bowe is EBay-savvy; he waited until two minutes before the cutoff time and then put in 10 swift bids. He ended up getting the place for just about what he'd offered the owner in the first place.

"I'm proud of it," he says. "It's the oldest production microbrewery in Southern California. It was the state of the art when it was built and it's still a wonderful brewery."

The exterior, like everything else at Alpine Village, has a rustic German look. Inside, the brewery is lined with white tile and filled with stainless steel tanks, ranging from that 650-gallon boiling kettle to a couple of 1,850-gallon fermenting tanks. In another room, there's a bottling line with the moving parts of the equipment painted in the Angel City label's colors.

Just as Bowe is showing off the miniature silos where he stores his grain, an earnest young man in a T-shirt wanders into the brewery carrying a small, plastic orange juice-type bottle full of sinister-looking dark fluid.

He turns out to be a salesman, and the stuff in the bottle, he explains, is liquid brewing sugar that he imports from Belgium. More exactly, it's a sort of Belgian-made molasses. He says it gives a more authentic flavor to Belgian-style ales.

Bowe tells the young man that he already has a brewing sugar he likes, so it's no sale. Nevertheless, the two go ahead and indulge in 10 minutes' worth of eager beer talk about the ins and outs of brewing sugar. It turns out they're both fans of a book on Belgian Trappist-style ales titled "Brew Like a Monk."

Well, where there's perfectionism, as there abundantly is in craft brewing, there's bound to be a certain geek factor. If you want, Bowe can tell you all about decoction mashing and its merits in contrast with infusion mashing. It's a subject that would bring most dinner-table conversations to a halt.

But Bowe makes excellent German-style beers using the technique. His lager is crisp and fresh-tasting (one reason being simply that it's not pasteurized). He also makes a fine dunkel, a dark easy-drinking beer that combines the light, dry effect of lager with the roasted flavors of a stout or porter.

Vitzen (pronounced "VITE-sen" -- Bowe's spelling of the German word "weizen") is his wheat beer, with the fascinating caramel/ clove/banana aroma of a hefeweizen. (That flavor is due to a specific yeast, used only for wheat beers, rather than to the flavor of wheat itself.) It's an impressive version, cleaner and less cloying than most imported wheat beers.

On the infusion side, Bowe makes an English ale with a fruity-spicy nose, dry palate and moderate hops and a good, bold IPA (India pale ale) with a full, malty palate. It's in the West Coast IPA style, with a more boisterous note of hops than an English IPA would have.

And then there's the Belgian-style ale, Abbey. Belgian yeast and malts give it a mellow nose of spice and dried fruits, and that dose of brewing sugar provides an 8% (16 proof) alcohol level. C'est crazy, mon dude.

"This is a hard business," Bowe says. "I'm good at it, but I'm still struggling. Making beer is the easy part -- selling beer is the hard part. You're competing with great breweries from all over the world.

"I'm bullish, things are looking good. Now I'm running into strangers who say they know my beer. People out of town are getting to know me too. I do very well at hotels, because people want to try something local when they come here.

"I'm making a local beer. I want to be the quality microbrewery of Los Angeles."

*

Angel City beers are available at the Wine House in West L.A., Beverage Warehouse in Marina del Rey, Beverages & More in Torrance, Cap N' Cork Junior Market in Silver Lake, many Whole Foods locations and all Bristol Farms markets. Most are sold in 22-ounce bottles (\$3.39), but the ale is available in six-packs.

Kegs are available at the brewery, 833 W. Torrance Blvd., #105, Torrance, (310) 329-8881. For locations where Angel City beers are on draft, go to www.angelcitybrewing.com/

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: ANGEL CITY: Michael Bowe at his Torrance brewery.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Carlos Chavez Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: BY THE BOTTLE: Michael Bowe's success in home brewing led to his Angel City line.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Carlos Chavez Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: CRAFTSMAN: Bowe says he can now taste a beer and "tell you how it was made."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Carlos Chavez Los Angeles Times