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Cleveland Brew Shop is tapping into a booming market

Tremont business is capitalizing on area's thirst for craft brews with a do-it-yourself touch



Photo credit: MARC GOLUB

Paul Benner opened the Cleveland Brew Shop last November.

neighborhood on Cleveland's West Side, the 1,200-square-foot showroom could be considered a home brewer's arsenal, armed with all the malts, hops and equipment one might need to conjure up a delicious brew. But fear not, wine lovers — the store also has the proper equipment and ingredients for one's winemaking needs.

While he wouldn't provide exact figures, Mr. Benner said the store has seen steady growth in business since its opening. The small operation has sustained a regular flow of foot traffic, and its twice-monthly home brewing classes are booked through May.

"We try and cater to that new brewer, and we answer the same questions 50 times a week. It doesn't matter to us," Mr. Benner said. "We also cater to that guy who knows what he's doing and doesn't want our opinion, but we'll give it if you ask. You've got the freedom to brew what you want."

By **TIMOTHY MAGAW**

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Given the horde of craft breweries in the area serving up foamy and intoxicating beverages, it's no secret locals of all stripes like to guzzle down beer. And, as of late, stirring up a batch from the comfort of one's own home appears to be the hottest trend on tap.

In the hope of capitalizing on Northeast Ohio's growing reputation as a hops-friendly region and perhaps to make a few bucks doing what he loves, Paul Benner last November opened the Cleveland Brew Shop — the city's first supply store dedicated solely to the home brewer.

"People are way more savvy about beer," said Mr. Benner, who in addition to running the store holds a full-time gig in admissions at a local college. "There are definitely more beer geeks out there. They know the difference between this IPA and that IPA."

Nestled on West 14th Street next to Bac Asian American Bistro & Bar in the cozy Tremont

Also, the Brew Shop is receiving help from the nonprofit Tremont West Development Corp. in plotting a modest hop farm on a small parcel of land down the street from the shop just south of the Interstate 490 bridge. The harvest of the hop farm will be sold to home brewers.

"There's just a growing market for this," said Cory Riordan, Tremont West's executive director, who himself has dabbled in home brewing. "We're excited for Paul (Benner) and excited to have him in the neighborhood. He adds a different element and different attraction that will continue to bring people into the neighborhood."

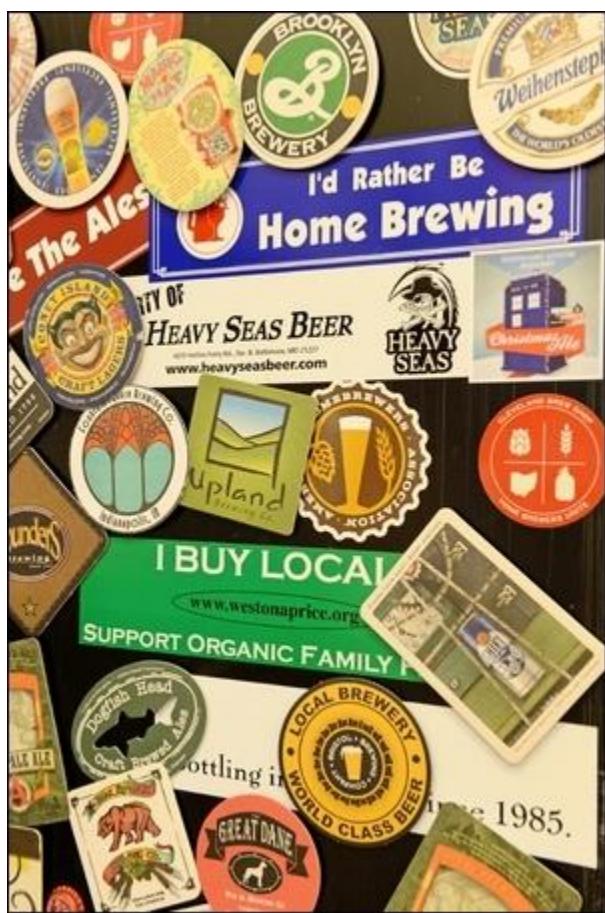


Photo credit: MARC GOLUB

A look inside the Cleveland Brew Shop in Tremont.

Home-brewed beer, Mr. Benner said, isn't necessarily a replacement for commercially available libations. Instead, the delicate brewing process often gives people a better appreciation for their favorite craft beers.

Craft breweries, especially those in Ohio, have experienced double- and even triple-digit percentage increases in output over the last couple years, as reported previously by *Crain's*. Home brewers appear to be riding that surge as well, as there are estimated to be more than 1 million home brewers

The SNOB factor

Education is a key element of Mr. Benner's growth plan. Once people are hooked on the hobby after attending one of the shop's classes, he said they're more likely to return on a regular basis for ingredients. He said the classes have been so well received that plans to take them on the road this summer as a potential activity for corporate events.

"I'd like to take all of our equipment into another facility and show them how to make beer or a wine as a team-building event," Mr. Benner said. "It'd be very interactive and would be like what we do in our shop but outside of our four walls."

Mr. Benner, his wife, Carolyn, and the shop's two employees recently started hawking one- and five-gallon starter kits of original brew shop recipes. The one-gallon kits cost about \$40 apiece, which include all the equipment and ingredients needed to brew 10, 12-ounce bottles of beer. The shop is pitching the kits to area retailers to spread its distribution beyond the confines of Tremont.

Home-brewed beer, Mr. Benner said, isn't

throughout the Untied States, according to the American Home Brewers Association.

Todd Donnelly, president of the Society of Northeast Ohio Brewers, or SNOB, the local home brewing group, characterized craft beer as the "gateway" to home brewing. Moreover, the information available about home brewing is light years ahead of where it was about a decade ago, he said. There's been a tremendous increase in information on the Internet and in the number of books directed toward the home brewer.

"People are just more aware of good beer," said Mr. Donnelly, whose club has about 150 active members. "It's available, and you don't have to go hunting for it. There are craft beer superstars. If anything, we've taken a turn from the old 'shot and a beer' concept, and we're getting to be snobs."



A look at T-shirts available at the Cleveland Brew Shop in Tremont.

A rewarding hobby

Mr. Donnelly said home brew shops traditionally have been located south of Cleveland despite the city's flair for craft brewing with the likes of Great Lakes Brewing Co. and others. Some of the more established shops include Leener's in Northfield and The Grape and Granary in Akron.

About three years ago, The Brew Mentor opened its doors in Mentor, and the Lake County business has experienced a "nice amount of growth," though shop co-owner Brian Seelinger wouldn't share revenue figures.

"People are thrilled we have the product that we do and also that we have the educated staff that can help out with their brewing and winemaking needs," Mr. Seelinger said.

Now that business appears to be taking off for The Brew Mentor, Mr. Seelinger said the shop is on the verge of securing a brewing license within the next four to six weeks, which would allow it to offer beer tastings on-site and teach customers how to reproduce a particular brew. The shop already offers a series of what it calls "beer clinics" for those willing to learn the art of home brewing.

Mr. Seelinger, who has been brewing his own beer for the last seven or eight years, said he got started brewing a batch in his buddy's garage. Since then, he has honed his skills and made a few bucks off the hobby, which he still enjoys.

"How many hobbies can you have where at the end of the day you end up with a 12-pack of beer?" Mr. Seelinger said.



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