

RECLAIMING THE ART OF BREWING

Hundreds of years ago, women brewers were driven from their professions after accusations of witchcraft; today, in the age of craft brewing, Wellington Brewery is supporting women in their return to the trade

By Dawn Matheson
Photography • Andrew Beveridge

I’VE BEEN INVITED to observe the rituals of a group of strange, scheming women involved in an ancient domestic art dating back to Babylonian times. Word has it, they’ve been hunched over a large cauldron all morning, sniffing herbs, mashing, boiling and stirring a dark fermented broth with a long paddle. I witness frequent cackling, and I swear I overhear talk of a “wort.” All the ladies are wearing matching black hats, and I’m not kidding.

To boot, they started “sampling” the brew at 9 a.m. “We figured we better at least mix it with coffee,” said one, referring to a rich chocolaty porter she called Cuckoo for Cocoa Husks.

“Emily’s our superstar. She brought in homemade rhubarb cake,” said another, pointing to a young woman who tipped her black toque at me. It had a big black boot embroidered on the brim.

Though they didn’t name it as such, it was obvious to me that these women, these six ecstatic women whose ages fell somewhere between 20 and 55, were here at Canada’s oldest independently owned microbrewery to worship Ninkasi, the ancient Sumerian tutelary goddess of beer.

We’re at Canada’s oldest independently owned microbrewery, Wellington Brewery right here in Guelph, and these women are making beer. For most, making beer is a first, but it’s certainly not a first for their gender. They are the gleeful winners of a draw held last March on the fourth and final night of a wild and wonderful series called Queen of Craft where women gather to talk, learn and drink — but mostly *own* the craft of making and drinking beer. As we sit around a table for a group chat, one woman says this gathering isn’t about drinking

Wellington Brewery’s 2015 Team Brew Queens. From left, Cassandra Tran, Emily Moon, Karyn Boscariol, Katie Junkin, Holly Schell and Pat Brady.



alcohol — but it’s “a grrreat side-effect,” pipes in another — it’s about connecting and this community of women.

And I believe her, for there is nary a sign of inebriation and many a sign of camaraderie.

From June to this past January, Waterloo Region Museum mounted “BEER! The Exhibit.” Stacy McLennan is the collections curator.

“Women have played a central role in beer-making since the early days of its consumption.” In medieval Europe — England, in particular — they were the brewsters (female home brewers) and “ale wives” who sold beer in taverns, McLennan says.

“If you look at the stereotypical witches garb — a cat, the pointed black hat, a broom stick and a bubbling cauldron — those are the pieces of equipment that brewsters would have used in their trade.”

I got the black cauldron part, but what of the other items? Turns out the wort is the liquid extracted from the mashing (the process of combining the milled grain with water and boiling) during the brewing of ale. The broomstick equates to the “ale stake” that swept up the grains (a stick with branches fastened at the end) but was also used to advertise the selling of beer at a home when stuck in the ground out front



or hung above the door. Supposedly, in the marketplace, female hucksters who flogged beer wore the high-pointed hats in order to stand out above the crowd. The cat? Well, the typical role cats have played throughout history — hunting vermin who raided the grain pantry.

With the rise of the Industrial Revolution, trade and industry specialization, beer production moved from the home to the marketplace, where men began to dominate the industry. This is when ale

wives and brewsters began to be associated with evil. “There are more depictions in art of ale wives in hell during this time period than any other profession,” McLennan explained. Some historians argue that women were accused of witchcraft in order to drive them out of business, essentially killing off the competition.

Fast forward to the 1980s in Canada and the “flavour revolution” known as craft brewing (small batch brewing with an emphasis on local collaboration over large competition) where women are making a comeback in the trade, without the fear of being burned at the stake. “The whole craft brewery industry is really changing the industry within Canada and you see a lot more women involved, in some capacity, in a brewery — whether they are actually the brewers, or if they’re involved with the marketing or promotion,” says McLennan.

“Still, beer drinking isn’t really considered a ‘ladylike’ activity,” says Karyn Boscariol, Wellington Brewery’s events manager and one of the group of six gathered ’round the table today. It’s true. I don’t know many women who brag about a beer belly as

Left: Holly Schell pours in some pelletized hops.
Above: Cassandra Tran adds hibiscus flowers.
Right: Karyn Boscariol holds dried hibiscus, which provides a citrusy flavour and a pinky-red colour.

some men do. I grew up with the ads: boys watching the game, boys at the bar after the game. Cheers! Clink! Girl in tight tank top goes by. Wink, wink.

The gender gap is closing in on beer drinkers and alienating a big chunk of consumers just isn’t smart. In 2015, men between the ages of 19 and 30 consumed 19.9 per cent of beer; women, 12.1 per cent. As the age increases, the gap narrows, with women over 71 overtaking the men.

“I love beer!” says Boscariol, which is what initially drew her to the job when she saw the listing online six years ago. “I was a mom in my early 30s ... they thought I’d never last at the job — you know, I have a family and this is a nighttime events gig.” But Boscariol loved it. “What matters most to me in life is making people feel good.” Eventually, she craved more than serving and showcasing products, so the owners encouraged her to create something that really charged her up. She dreamed of conjuring a position as a “buzzologist” — the science of buzz and how to get that perfect good feeling — but she had another idea in mind.

“I had been researching beer and women’s role in history ... and noticing more and more women coming to our events — some with their men, who confessed knowing nothing about beer.” Boscariol started feeding beer knowledge to thirsty women and sensed the foundation of a great community. Meanwhile, on her own time, Boscariol was organizing local women’s charity events with funds going to Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis. She put the two together and Queens of Craft was born. She had lots of inspiration: women beer kinships have been cropping up everywhere. There’s the Pink Boots Society and Barley’s Angels, the Society of Beer Drinking Ladies and Beer 4 Boobs (women brewing to raise funds for breast cancer) plus the Hoppy Bitches, which have a chapter here in Guelph.

The first year, 2014, Boscariol held four events, each session exploring a different angle of beer: *herstory* and women today in beer, industry trends and beer pairings with

chocolate and cheese. “Beer pairs much more effectively with cheese than wine,” Boscariol said. “The carbonation in beer lifts the layer of fat that cheese leaves on your tongue — it enhances the flavour.”

Every session sold out, with proceeds in support of Women in Crisis.

I attended a session at Guelph’s eBar featuring a panel of 11 women in the beer industry, women like Crystal Luxmore, a beer columnist and certified cicerone (beer sommelier), Wellington Brewery’s own general manager Sarah Dawkins and Erica McOustra, brewing team lead at Steam Whistle Brewing. It was an incredible evening — I was not prepared for the mob of strong, motivated, fun-loving women I’d luck into.

“That first year, out of Queen, Welly (Wellington Brewery) hired three women attendees — all with a real spark for beer, even one works as a chemist in our lab now,” Boscariol said.

But Boscariol’s “favourite favourite” part of the Queen experience was the creation of the Team Brew Queens. Women who attend at least three of the events are entered into a draw to create and brew a Welly One-Off (small batch brewing).

2014’s six-woman team surpassed all of Boscariol’s wildest dreams. “It was a real sisterhood. The women got soooo into it.” And so did the brew judges at the Ontario Brewing Awards. 2014: A Spice Odyssey, a Chai Latte Stout, a rich and slightly sweet malt body balanced with black tea



and chai spices including cardamom, cinnamon, ginger and cloves donated by the Bollywood Bistro, won the Gold Award. A rereleased batch, 2015: A Spice Odyssey, is available in Wellington Brewery's retail store today and \$1 from each bottle goes to Women in Crisis.

Which brings us to this year's team and their creation.

To my right during our group chat at the brewery is Emily Moon, the rhubarb-cake baker, who by day works in manufacturing sales. Though new to Guelph, she is not a newbie to brewing, having home-brewed for years. "That first night I sat down at a table by myself, and, by chance, members of the Hoppy Bitches joined me!" Moon is one of them now.

Next to Moon, sitting on a bar stool, is Cassandra Tran, who looks to be not long past drinking age. I'm right. She's only been legal for a couple of years, but is soon to be a master — enrolled in Niagara College's brewmaster program. "My dream is to drive a craft beer and food truck to festivals all over Canada."

Katie Junkin, possibly the greenest to the beer scene, works in local public health. "I signed up for all four events as a total stranger," said Junkin, who recently relocated from British Columbia. She tried to convince some of her girlfriends to come to the series, but they are mostly wine drinkers. "I don't have a lot of women in my life who drink beer! I do now," she says, laughing.

Holly Schell, who also attended the series by herself, saw a poster in a Waterloo pub advertising the Guelph sessions. "I've always read 'The Beer Bible' at my dad's friend's bar." The religious studies student at McMaster University, who works part time at Toyota, has since joined the Hoppy Bitches Guelph branch and is also a home brewer. "My last batch was a black lager with cherries."

Yumm, coo the rest of the women around the table. "Holly is the super crazy creative one!" said Moon. "When we were brainstorming ideas, every single one of hers was at the top of the list! We loved her

Cranachan beer aged in a whisky barrel idea." Cranachan is a Scottish dessert made from raw oats and berries topped with whipped cream and whisky. "But we couldn't brew it in our time frame," explained Boscariol. "Takes too long and we didn't have the barrels."

The last woman at the table is Pam Brady, the oldest member who fondly recalls drinking Welly's classic Arkell Best Bitter in her youth, still available today. Brady, who works at what she calls a very conservative banking job, said her name actually wasn't drawn from the toque when the team was picked. "A girl at my table gave me her spot! She knew I was desperate to brew and offered it to me."

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Stacy McLennan

The sixth team member, Yvette Roy, had just given birth a week earlier and wasn't here on this day. Moon shows me a photo Roy had emailed to the group with her new baby.

The first time these ladies gathered, they had pooled all their flavour wishes. "We all wanted something fresh — different from all the stouts that come out in winter."

"Yeah, that 'coming in from the outside' feel."

"Earthy, sappy, woody!"

"And we wanted a pinky-red beer," something seasonal for Christmas. The ladies next met up to sample flavours by making tea. Three brews: pine, spruce and hibiscus, which would add a citrus flavour plus provide the pinky-red colour. Spruce won out. "Pine smelled good, but the taste was just way too astringent."

Boscariol did some very local sourcing of the spruce tips. "Let's just say I was

following the 100-metre diet," which I think might mean her backyard. She filled the red shopping bag she had hooked on her bar stool. The hibiscus came from a local tea vendor.

In the end, three flavour ingredients: spruce tips, hibiscus and citrusy hops. The ladies took their idea to Marvin Dyck, Wellington Brewery's bearded brewmaster — one of the many bearded men who brew — and he loved it.

Next was a name: "Spruce Pinkstein was a hit, so was Getting Twiggy With It, Twin Peaks. And All Spruced Up was a big contender."

Finally, the nod to women's domestic art and the pointy tip of the spruce won out with "Needlepoint Hibiscus Spruce Ale."

As the group interview ends, everyone clinks glasses then hops off their bar stools, letting out a few more cackles. Time to sacrifice more "spruce babies." Apparently, when the group was tying together the spruce tips and stuffing them in little hairnets to add to the whirlpool, they called them their spruce babies in honour of their missing sixth team member. Then they emailed a photo to Roy of the group with their babies.

I asked Boscariol what she has planned for the March 2016 Queen of Craft series. "Women have Beer 101 down now, so we are going to really specialize and focus on the history of women in the craft." She's thinking of one whole session just on yeast and will definitely bring back food and beer pairing with Jennifer Whyte, a resident cheese expert with a booth at the Guelph Farmers' Market. "Maybe a whole traditional farmhouse beer pairing — you know, resurrecting the kitchens of 16th-century Europe when women were brewing beer, making bread, fermenting cheese and curing meats," Boscariol said.

But her current area of interest? It's exploring the secrets of ancient fermentation and beers made with medicinal purposes crafted from wild herbs popular long ago.

"Like witches' brew?" I joked. "Exactly," Boscariol responded. ●

Wellington Brewery's Queen of Craft series

Bitchin' Beer Blogs

March 4, 2016, 7-9 p.m.
The Albion Hotel, 49 Norfolk St., Guelph

A discussion with some of Ontario's most knowledgeable female beer bloggers, including Crystal Luxmore (certified ciccerone and beer writer), Robin LeBlanc (beer writer and photographer) and Kat Rogers-Hern (chief beer educator and social media director).

Yeast the Beast

March 11, 2016, 7-9 p.m.
Opus Lounge, 96 Macdonell St., Guelph

Join yeast specialists Anita Caven (microbial enthusiast), Siobhan McPherson (lead brewer, Burdock Brewery) and Christina Coady (brewer, Folly Brewing) in an exploration of this complex microorganism.

Battle of the Chefs

March 18, 2016, 7-9 p.m.
Royal Electric, 52 Macdonell St., Guelph

Learn why beer is becoming an integral ingredient in the culinary arts. Witness two of Guelph's top-notch chefs Becky Hood (head chef at 39 Carden Street) and Heather Skinner (head chef at Baker Street Station) go head-to-head while you sip, savour and vote!

Party Pairings

March 25, 2016, 3-5 p.m. and 6-8 p.m.

eBar, 41 Quebec St., Guelph
Learn how to pair cheese, chocolate and beer with cheese expert Jen Whyte.

For more information, visit wellingtonbrewery.ca

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