

Vt. Beer's Rapid Success Gets Neighbors Bubbling

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

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Dave Gram, Associated Press



WATERBURY, Vt. (AP) — A Vermont microbrewery that makes one of the world's best beers plans to close down its retail operation to head off the trouble that's brewing with its neighbors.

Customers lined up at The Alchemist brewery on Tuesday to buy cases of Heady Topper, the double IPA that Beer Advocate magazine recently ranked No. 1 out of the top 250 beers in the world.

The hoppy concoction is so popular — sales have grown 600 percent in the two years since the brewery opened on the outskirts of Waterbury — that owners Jen and John Kimmich plan to shutter their retail operation on November 15 to avoid a neighborhood dispute.

"We've had complaints from neighbors," Jen Kimmich said. "We would have had to fight to keep on going ... We decided to close down before it turns into a large legal battle."

The couple plan to re-open the retail outlet as soon as possible and is actively looking for other locations in Waterbury, Kimmich said. While the retail end of the business is closing for now, the brewery will continue operating and will keep its staff of 25, she said.

The Alchemist has become a jewel in the frothy crown of Vermont microbreweries that had spawned a new sort of beer tourism, in which connoisseurs from around the world would come to sample prize-winning brews of Lawson's Finest Liquids in Waitsfield, the Shed in Stowe, Hill Farmstead in Greensboro and others.

Even a temporary closure was a disappointment to fans stopping by the shop Tuesday.

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"It's a sad situation, it really is," said Andy McLenithan of Manchester in southern Vermont, who with his co-worker Scott Senecal had driven an hour out of their way on the trip home from building a baseball diamond in St. Johnsbury to stop at the Waterbury brewery.

Andy Ferko of nearby Bolton said he had known the Kimmichs since he used to stop by at the Alchemist, the restaurant they owned on Waterbury's Main Street until it was closed two years ago by flooding from Tropical Storm Irene.

"I come to Waterbury to go to the hardware store, the grocery store," Ferko said. Visiting with the Kimmichs as he stocked up on Heady Topper was "kind of a little social visit, too."

Ferko said his wife, Mags Bonham, was losing an outlet for her artwork, including earrings in the shape of hops kept in a display case next to the main beer counter.

While news of the closing was greeted with grief-stricken comments by customers who crashed the Heady Topper website Tuesday afternoon, it drew a big sigh of relief from Amy Kinsell, who owns the house next door to the brewery,

"The busier they've gotten, the more chaotic my life has gotten," she said in an interview on her front porch. Beer lovers can be more boisterous than considerate at times. The driveway at the Kimmichs' business is easy to miss, and Kinsell said there was one half-hour period last summer when 26 people turned around in her driveway.

When she parked a vehicle across the entrance to her driveway to slow that traffic down, people turned around on her grass, she said. Then there were the smoke and odors from the brewery's operations, and noise from the refrigerated trucks in its backyard.

There was no drowning her sorrows in her neighbor's product, Kinsell said. "I'm not a beer drinker, not a fan of any beer."

Source URL (retrieved on 08/31/2014 - 2:22am):

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