

# edible

IOWA RIVER VALLEY®

Celebrating Local Food Across Iowa

Number 20 :: Summer, 2011



*edible* Communities  
2011 James Beard Foundation  
Publication of the Year

Farm-to-Chef  
Connections

Letter from an  
Afghanistan Farm

Canned Microbrews

Expanding our Local  
Food Economy

Crepe Escape

Peace Tree Brewing

Zins

Bistro 322

## 5th Anniversary Issue



# Craft on Draught

...And in bottles too!

By Renee Brincks

When the founders of Knoxville's Peace Tree Brewing Company first talked about opening a taproom, they had no commercial brewing or distribution experience. But, they did have a book.

"We found the Brewers Association, and on the website was a 'how to start a craft brewery' book...It was our first purchase as a company," laughs Megan McKay Ziller, who launched Peace Tree with her father, Dan McKay, and her husband, Scott Ziller.

The partners went from poring over pages to pouring pints in just six months. Less than two years later, some 170 stores and restaurants across Iowa sell Peace Tree draft and bottled beer. In addition to bringing new signature and seasonal brews to the state's menus, the brewery has become a social hub with regular live music performances, business meetings and family-friendly events. "Some people weren't sure how a brewery would fit in with Knoxville, Iowa," says McKay Ziller. "But then, everyone was pretty excited. They started dreaming with us."

The dream started with Dan McKay, who first suggested building a brewery in a former Nash Rambler dealership just off Knoxville's town square. Peace Tree's principals were already working together nearby, at McKay Insurance Agency, and they saw in the empty space an opportunity to re-energize the downtown area. The taproom would provide a gathering place for locals and visitors, and bottling the beer could generate additional revenue from a larger statewide market.

"When trying to think of a business that would fit well, we wanted something that would allow us to reinvest in our community and, hopefully, spur other development or investment – or at least bring tourism in," says McKay Ziller.

The trio decided to move forward with the venture in March 2009, and the following month they headed to the annual Craft Brewers Conference to research and network with other professionals. By June, they were finalizing their business plan and interviewing potential brew masters. Though Ziller had homebrewed a

few batches of his own, he and his partners wanted to bring on someone with more extensive education and industry experience.

They found their match in Joe Kesteloot, a Chicago native who studied at the American Brewers Guild in Vermont and apprenticed with Big Horn Brewing in Illinois before spending nearly five years at Minnesota's Cold Spring Brewing Company. With a strong background and local ties – his wife's family lives not far from Knoxville – Kesteloot was a natural fit.

"I had a pretty good position at Cold Spring," he says, "but it's every brewer's dream to get into a brewery at startup and watch it grow."

Kesteloot created several recipes in advance of Peace Tree's taproom opening that fall, brewing 10 to 20 gallons at a time. By March 2010, when he fired up the 20-barrel, 620-gallon production system, he had three signature styles and several seasonal release ideas.

Three Peace Tree beers are now bottled year-round. Hop Wrangler is a coppery India pale ale that combines American and English malts and hops with Belgian yeast. Three types of hops add subtle bitterness to the malty Red Rambler ale. Chocolate and rye flavors shine through in the Rye Porter. Peace Tree's seasonal selections include a Belgian-style blond, a double IPA and an imperial stout. Kesteloot is at work on two blends aged in Templeton Rye barrels. He says the 2010 rollback of a five percent alcohol-by-weight cap on Iowa beers opened up new options, as well.

Last summer, Kesteloot introduced Cornucopia, a saison that incorporates sweet corn in the brewing process. Saisons, also known as farmhouse ales, are light, low-alcohol beers traditionally brewed, as the story goes, to refresh farm workers during the harvest. Kesteloot came up with his own take on the style after he read about extracting sugars from corn stalks. In true farm-to-table fashion, he sources stalks and kernels from area growers, and this year the brew will again be available by late August or early September in bottles and on tap.

Short's Burger & Shine in Iowa City dedicates all ten of its tap lines to Iowa beers. The restaurant pours several Peace Tree brews, and will bring back Cornucopia again this year. General Manager Tia Tiefenthaler calls the brewery's offerings unique and creative, and lists Cornucopia as a particularly popular seller. "Last year, some people tried it just because of the name," she says. "It flew out of here. Lots of people liked it."

While he appreciates the opportunity to create a beer that uses local ingredients, Kesteloot also enjoys attracting that new audience.

"I wanted to use sweet corn to involve people who normally wouldn't try craft beer. This piques their interest and brings them in the door," he says. Once loyal big-brand beer drinkers sample something brewed locally, they are more likely to taste other specialty lagers and ales. That openness excites the team at Peace Tree.

"Cornucopia helped people who normally didn't drink craft beer to come in and try something different," says Kesteloot. "Once they started trying that beer, they started asking what else we had coming out...I think it's worked out pretty well." McKay Ziller recognizes an increasing awareness of what small breweries have to offer, though there is still room for promotion.

"It's fun to see a 60-year-old guy come in and say, 'I went to one of those breweries in Colorado with my kid when I was visiting, and I'm excited to have something nice like that here.' On the other hand, we also have nice people who come in and don't know anything about craft beer, or they say they don't like beer, or they think it's only for their kid or their husband," she explains. "We teach them about how they can experience different flavors and tastes. When they say, 'I don't like dark beer,' we show them how they can drink it and what they can drink it with. All of a sudden a light goes on and it's a completely different experience."

Peace Tree's taproom, just 30 miles from Interstate 80, draws travelers driving through the state as well as local residents. McKay Ziller says the brewery aims to offer diverse events that encourage community members to socialize and strengthen connections. And, because many of the brewery's employees have families, a number of activities are kid-friendly. There are concerts, corporate networking get-togethers, beer dinners and knitting nights. Staff members hand out trees on Earth Day. Administrators from 3M hold training sessions at the taproom, and Peace Tree has teamed with the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum on promotions.

"We try to network as much as possible. It is beer, but it's really all about the relationships developed around it," says McKay Ziller.

As an example, she tells the story of Peace Tree's first bottling night back in 2010, when Kesteloot struggled to get the new production system running smoothly. A group of taproom customers noticed what was happening and headed back to the brewhouse to assist. Brewery founders also looked to locals to help select which beers to bottle, and they've used Facebook and Twitter to build the brand and introduce their beer to new stores and restaurants.

"The internet and social media allow us to be very connected to people, even

though we're in a rural little town. It's inexpensive. It takes some time, but it really helps us forge connections both with our customers and our intermediaries," McKay Ziller explains. "It allows us to show some personality, too. We're not just some corporation that's closed off; we are real living, breathing people."

Peace Tree has grown to four full-time employees and about twice that many part-time taproom servers, and the company recently linked up with distributors that will expand its reach into new parts of Iowa. The brewery is on track to double its production over last year, and whole batches of seasonal beers often are spoken for before they've even been bottled.

Coordinating all the moving parts can be a challenge, but positive response from customers makes it all worthwhile. Kesteloot says people have been overwhelmingly supportive – even those outside of the state. During this year's Craft Brewers Conference in San Francisco, several attendees recognized and complimented the Peace Tree team on their work.

"It's pretty cool to see us get a good reputation in the marketplace and bring some positive light to Iowa," says McKay Ziller. "People discount Iowa, but there's a lot going on here. If we can get people to notice through beer and then turn them on to the other cool stuff, that's great."

**WHEN YOU GO...**

Peace Tree Brewing Company  
107 W Main Street, Knoxville

641.842.BREW (2739)  
www.PeaceTreeBrewing.com

The Peace Tree taproom is open to the public on Thursdays and Fridays from 4-10 p.m., and on Saturdays from 1-10 p.m. Draft selections change weekly. Customers can also pick up merchandise and growlers of root beer on weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. Food is not served on-site, but several local restaurants deliver right to the taproom. Call to schedule group tastings, tours and private events.