

Brothers Pour Their Hearts (and Heads) into Chicago Road Microbrewery

by Jim Stickford

For the past 20 years, brothers Eric and Bret Kuhnenn have built up their microbrewery business slowly but surely.

And their hard work has paid off. The brews, made at their place of business on Chicago Road in Warren, are not only sold around Detroit, they're sold internationally.

"We just went to the Copenhagen Beer Celebration last April in Denmark," Bret said. "We have a beer distributor based (there) that sells our brews and we were finally able to go to the celebration."

Eric said the event is a taste festival and attracts beer lovers from around the world. People came from as far as Brazil to attend the festival. These beer fans ended up tasting their wares.

With this success, it's natural to think that the brothers come from a brewing family. They don't. Their father Eric Sr. worked as a contractor and owned a hardware store.

"Back in the early 1990s, I showed Bret how to use home brewing equipment to make his own beer while he was attending Macomb College," Eric said. "He took to it, but had a hard time finding home brewing supplies."

So the brothers decided to become suppliers of home brew equipment and supplies.

"This was before the Internet," Bret said. "We would go to brewing clubs and talk about our products. That really got the business going."

The brothers said that by carrying a wide variety of malts and other ingredients, they were able to become a well-known and respected home-brewing supply company.

"The store kept growing," Eric said. "At the time, home brewing was becoming popular. It later went into a decline, but it has become popular again. I'd say it's more popular than ever."

Bret said he enjoyed home brewing and would make 12 gallons of his own brew every Sunday while he was in college. Find-

ing friends to help drink the product was no problem.

It was about this time that he realized he didn't want to go into his father's hardware business. So he and his brother decided to open a microbrewery with a tasting room license. This allows the brothers to sell their product to a state-sanctioned distributor. The distributor can then sell the beers to various liquor outlets around Michigan.

Their license is different from a brewpub license, which authorizes the license holder to only manufacture and sell a product at the licensed premises – not to a distributor. Also, brewpub licensees can produce no more than 2,000 barrels of beer per year.

Bret said that in 2012 they brewed about 1,700 barrels (a barrel contains 31 gallons). They are on track to brew about 2,000 barrels in 2013, Eric said.

"We are in the process of setting up a brewery in Clinton Township," Bret said. "If it isn't up and running by next January, construction will certainly be well under way. Once it's finished, capacity should be about 15,000 barrels a year."

Eric said the biggest brewery in the state is Bell's and they brew about 250,000 barrels a year.

The Kuhnenn Brewing Company has 23 different brews on sale at its facility at any time. They have more recipes than that, so they like to mix up their brew menu. And they are also a winery, but that side of the business is smaller than it used to be.

The brothers said they have no plans to become the next Budweiser, but they do want to move up from being a microbrewery to being a strong regional craft brewery.

They like to experiment with flavors, Bret said, adding that part of what made him successful was his willingness when he was a homebrewer to keep working on the same few recipes until he got them right.

When they started out, they bought a lot of their equipment used.



Brothers Bret, left, and Eric Kuhnenn at their Warren brewery.

"We have some tanks that were made in Holland and sold to people in Japan during (that country's) home brewing phase," Eric said. "When that (Japanese operation) went bust, the tanks went to auction and we bought them."

Bret said he just returned from Evert in Northern Michigan where he bought two dairy tanks that can hold 100 barrels of liquid. He noted that when Prohibition came along, Stroh's went from brewing beer to making ice cream. A storage tank can hold milk or beer.

"We bought stuff at auction in the early days because that was what we could afford," Eric said.

In addition to getting a lot of their equipment used, the brothers also had much of it custom-made.

"The nice thing about being in Warren is that there are always welders around," Bret said. "They built a lot of our equipment to our specs."

Eric said that their father's skill as a contractor helped out in the design of the equipment. And they said they inherited his work ethic and sense of craftsmanship as someone who built houses, which transfers very well to craft brewing.

They learned hard work from him and it's paid off.

"When we started, we didn't have money, but we were able to put sweat equity into the business," Eric said. "That meant a lot of 70-hour weeks for the first few years. When people ask us what our secret is, I tell them it's no secret, just a lot of hard work."

Many of their customers work at GM's Tech Center or come from the Army's TACOM facility, Eric said.

Bret said he still enjoys coming up with new recipes. And the quality and variety of the brothers' brews has placed their business on the map – the beer touring map.

"We get beer tours from states

like Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York," Bret said. "I like to say that these people are going on a 'beergramage.'"

"Part of what helps our reputation is going to beer festivals," Eric said. "People ask me why we go to these events when we don't have product to sell there."

Eric said the answer is these festivals help get the company's name out to beer aficionados. Whenever a Kuhnenn brew wins a ribbon or is mentioned by a beer blogger as being excellent, their reputation grows.

"We've done very well and have been mentioned at sites like ratebeer.com and beeradvocate.com," Eric said. "We get people from Europe stopping by all the time. I like to say that we're Warren's top tourist attraction."

The facility currently employs 27 people and boasts a dozen fermenters on site, some of which are multiple batch-sized, Bret said.

It takes about two weeks to make most beers. They rotate their brews among the fermenters, making it possible to offer 23 different brews at any one time.

Eric is single. Bret is married. He and his wife Julijana have four daughters.

"We've had offers to sell the place," Bret said. "But we've turned them down. For myself, I don't want to work for The Man."

"We've put a lot of work into the business," Eric said. "But this is what we do. We've been seeing growth since we started and I'd like to continue growing on our own. We grew up about a mile from here. This is where we want to be, doing what we want to do."

Bank Donates to Macomb Scholarships

First State Bank has donated \$10,000 to Macomb Community College to establish a scholarship fund for graduates of East Detroit High School.

Ten \$1,000 scholarships will be awarded during the 2013-14 school year to eligible graduates who must have a minimum of a 2.5 grade point average and enroll at Macomb for at least six credit hours.

"I am so pleased we are able to present to the students of East Detroit High School this scholarship opportunity," said Eugene Lovell, president and CEO, First State Bank.

"Our success as a business, and as a community, depends upon our youngest members growing and thriving in a complex, diverse economy. Macomb Community College understands this, and stands committed to help these students meet their educational needs."

"Macomb Community College is deeply appreciative of First State Bank's support in connecting residents to educational opportunities that will advance them into meaningful career pathways," said James Jacobs, Ph.D., president, Macomb Community College. "We also applaud First State Bank for their leadership as a locally based business willing to make a tangible commitment to our community's economic vitality by helping residents get the education necessary for success in the New Economy."

The scholarship fund is an important addition to the private scholarship funds administered

by the Macomb Community College Foundation, which generates and manages private financial support for the educational purposes and objectives of the college, Jacobs said.

During the past year, more than \$185,000 was awarded from

the college's private scholarship funds to help Macomb Community College students pursue and persist in achieving their educational goals.

For more information, email foundation@macomb.edu or call 586-445-7302.

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