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Into the Soul of Oregon

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Monastic Brewing

Taste and believe

By Amy Mason Doan - Contributing Writer
Photos by Eugene Pavlov

Father Martin Grassel is checking the gravity on a batch of farmhouse ale. He pushes up the sleeve of his black robe and, with an expert spin, drops a hydrometer into the golden liquid.

"Too high," he said, shaking his head. "We need to be at nine." This batch needs more time.



Patience is a virtue in brewing. Luckily, the monastic community of Mount Angel Abbey values patience, along with productivity, creativity and hospitality. These brotherly ideals will serve it well as it launches Benedictine Brewery, Oregon's first abbey brewery and a gutsy for-profit venture into the \$14 billion craft beer industry in the United States.

Laypeople may not realize that monastic values allow the consumption of beer, and holy brothers have been honing brewing since medieval times. Back then, beer was safer to drink than water because it was boiled. Monks relied on beer for energy during fasting. And brewing “liquid bread” is a centuries-old tradition. It’s a way to avoid taking charity, which is discouraged by The Rule of St. Benedict.

Nonetheless, brewing is a first for Mount Angel Abbey, founded in 1882 when a group of Benedictines came to Oregon from a Swiss village. Homesick for the Alps, they built the monastery on a hilltop high above tiny Mount Angel, now best known for its annual Oktoberfest.



The Abbey has managed many successful businesses in its 133-year history, including a printing press, a tree farm and 300 acres of hop fields in this excellent growing climate. For decades, the hop fields were leased, the prized green cones harvested every fall for other brewers.

But in 2014, Abbey hops finally started

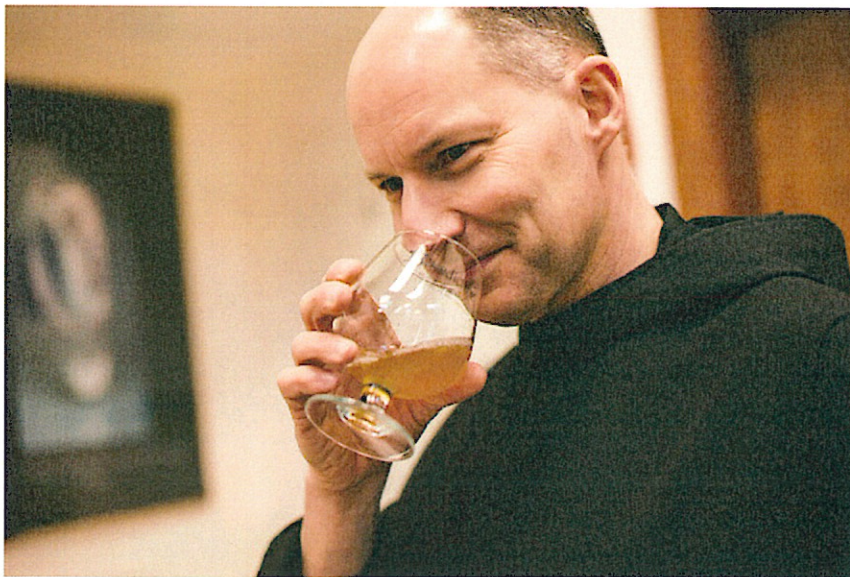
flavoring beer stamped with the brothers’ own label—Benedictine Brewery, whose motto is, “Taste and Believe.”

The Abbey community of fifty-five monks voted to start a brewing business in 2012. Monastic support was overwhelming, and the venture had a champion in Father Martin, 52, who had recently taken an interest in home brewing. He had sampled great beers in Europe after his ordination in Rome, but didn’t get serious about brewing until he sipped a Deschutes Black Butte Porter at a monastery “Haustus,” or gathering with refreshments.



“That did it,” he said. “I had to know more about the process.”

Contrary to stereotypes of monks wandering around in silence all day, brothers make the most of every hour. They rise at 4:30 a.m., and although their day is punctuated by six prayer services, they make time for painting, hiking and study. A former engineer, Martin became engrossed in the scientific method behind brewing—the controlled experiments that result in a truly great beer.



So with the Abbey's blessing, Martin and Chris Jones, director of enterprises, got to work. They proceeded carefully, not wanting to shatter the tranquility on the hilltop with an oversized operation or to disappoint beer geeks with the first bottles. They knew that any monastic label carries high expectations for quality.

They had to get the flavor profile just right. Mount Angel has German roots, and many familiar abbey ales are Belgian.

“But we’re not German or Belgian—we’re a Swiss order,” said Martin. “The thing we kept coming back to was Oregon. Our hops, our excellent well water, a beer that Oregonians would appreciate.”

Martin and Jones called in experts from Portland State University for yeast trials and worked through twelve pilots of their first release until they got it right.

Pricing was a challenge; the Abbey didn’t want to be greedy or undercut other brewers, so they settled on an average price. The first 130 cases of Black Habit Dark Ale, at \$84 for a case of twelve twenty-two-ounce bottles, sold out within weeks of its June 2014 release date.

It’s a complex but approachable brew that has beer bloggers taking notice. Although it has roots in abbey ales, it is very different from familiar Belgian brands such as Chimay, an ale made by Trappist monks. The alcohol by volume is 7.8 percent, strong but not over the top by Oregon standards. There are subtle esters and aromas, an assertive maltiness, and a distinctly Oregon hoppy character.

“Brewing like a monk means creating something expressive rather than imitative, and they’ve done that,” said Stan Hieronymus, author of *Brew Like a Monk*. “They’re excellent, distinctive recipes.”



Now that Benedictine Brewery has a stable recipe for Black Habit, it’s moving on to a stout, a farmhouse ale and seasonals. Upright Brewing in Portland bottled the first batches, but the brothers have converted a dairy barn across from the hop fields to serve as its five-barrel operation.

Jones expects Benedictine Brewery to grow slowly, hitting

1,200 barrels a year, or about \$500,000 in gross revenue, within a few years. It’s a modest launch, considering that anything less than 15,000 barrels is still considered a microbrewery.

“For the monastic world, we’re moving at warp speed,” he quipped.