



honey, let's start a brewery

Home-brewed beer hearkens
back to a time of community.

*by Anna Dubrovsky
photos by Heather Mull*

BRIAN SPRAGUE WAS 19 the first time he tried to brew beer. He read a book on brewing, bought 10 pounds of barley from a feed mill and soaked the grains. After they germinated, he spread them on a cookie sheet and put them in his parents' oven, where they promptly caught fire. The oven never worked again. "I didn't tell my mom and dad about that for a long time," says Sprague, now 51.

The incident put his beer making on ice for about six years, but the dream lived on. The next time he gave it a go, he saved himself the trouble of sprouting and drying by buying malted barley. Things went a lot smoother.

He has been experimenting ever since. In 2006, he and his wife of 27 years, Minnie, opened a brewery on a former dairy farm near the town of Venango, about 25 miles south of Erie. This July, they celebrated the grand opening of an adjacent beer hall. Sprague Farm & Brew Works will be among 32 craft breweries at the third annual Steel City Big Pour, to be held September 12 in Pittsburgh's East End. Last year, tickets sold out for both sessions of the festival, which raises funds for Construction Junction, a nonprofit retailer of used building materials.

Like many Big Pour brewers, the Spragues got into the business because they love their beer. Before Yuengling was widely available in western Pennsylvania, they drove to Philadelphia to buy it.

In the mid-'80s, they discovered microbrews. They toured breweries when they went on vacations.

"We should do this," Brian would tell his wife.

In 1997 they bought a 65-acre farm adjacent to their home. The barn was littered with hay, sawdust, feed and cow manure, but the Spragues saw it as a fitting space for a brewery. With the help of an architect friend, some family, and a handful of contractors, they built their brewery out of scraps: old doors and wall panels from Construction Junction and garage sales; used beer tanks from a microbrewery in Easton, Pa.; kegs from another in Oregon; and stainless-steel fittings and glass tubing from area dairy farms gone belly up. The dairy and beer industries aren't all that different, they like to point out. "It used to be grain in, milk out. Now it's grain in, beer out," jokes Minnie. They serve beer to customers in glass milk jugs.

Like the brewery, the recently opened beer hall is a mosaic of reused materials. Burlap feed bags serve as wallpaper near the band stage. A staircase has wooden barrel slats for banisters. A massive heater from a manufacturing plant hangs from the ceiling. The stained-glass window featuring a trumpet-blowing angel came from a church in Venango. The Spragues turned the window on its side. Now the angel looks like it's doing a beer bong.

The brewery has produced about 10 brands



in its short life. The inaugural brew, Hellbender, is a porter named for the giant salamanders that inhabit nearby French Creek. An amber ale came next. The Spragues called it Rust Belt as a show of pride in their once-booming region. The couple's 25th wedding anniversary in 2007 inspired Bliss Berry, a wheat beer infused with 100 pounds of black raspberries from a Venango grower. Last year saw another limited-edition brew, French and Indian Corn Ale, made with chestnuts from a tree on their property and pumpkin and Indian corn from nearby farms. The batch was also flavored with the Spragues' very first harvest of hops.

Pennsylvania-grown hops are almost unheard of. The Pacific Northwest is the nation's major producer and where most of the hops in Sprague beers come from. But hops plants cling to the balcony of their beer hall and line a drive on their property. Last year, the crop yielded about 5 pounds of cone-shaped flowers. They hope to harvest 20 pounds this year.

Brian has other ambitions. He wants to try – as he did at 19 – to make his own malted barley. The Spragues grow barley, but there's no malt house in the area. His plan is to germinate the barley in a milk-cooling tank that came with the farm, mixing the grains and water by hand. Then he'll transfer the barley to a grain dryer on a nearby farm to halt the sprouting process and bring out the flavor components. "We're going to wing it," he says. "It may not work at all, but it's worth a try."

His bets have paid off so far. Sprague Farm was voted best brewery at the Erie Micro Brew Festival in April. More importantly, people are showing up at the out-of-the-way brewpub.

steel city big pour

WHEN: Saturday, Sept. 12, 2009.
Session One: 12-3 p.m.
Session Two: 5-8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$45 regular admission;
\$20 designated driver (no alcohol). Tickets available through ProArtsTickets.org

WHERE: Construction Junction, 214 N. Lexington St., Pittsburgh

"I went to school in that area," says David Lagnese, "main instigator" of Pittsburgh's Big Pour. "That's a place where people drink the crappiest beer known to man – \$12 a case. Brian and Minnie are teaching the community to appreciate beer. The brewery hearkens back to a time when there was a brewery in every neighborhood and you got fresh beer."

Locals aren't the only ones enamored of Sprague Farms. Pittsburghers are making the hundred-mile trip. Beer lovers from as far away as England and Australia have stayed at the five-bedroom farmhouse on the property, which rents for \$150 a night.

"You don't know when you build something in the middle of nowhere if people are going to show up. It's a big leap," says Brian, who still works full time as a construction supervisor and part time as a chainsaw carver. "But you only live once." •

SPRAGUE FARM & BREW WORKS
22113 US Hwy. 6 & 19
Venango, PA 16640
814.398.2885
sleepingchainsaw.com
Hours: 2-8 p.m. Thursday, noon-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday

