

S and the art of Beer brewing

Local beer maker hops into higher sales, toasts extreme tastes for success

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Beer is addictive. For Sam Spilker and Bob Myers, so is brewing it.

As the owner of Spilker Ales — Nebraska's only free-standing brewery — Sam Spilker is expanding his enterprise less than a year after its opening.

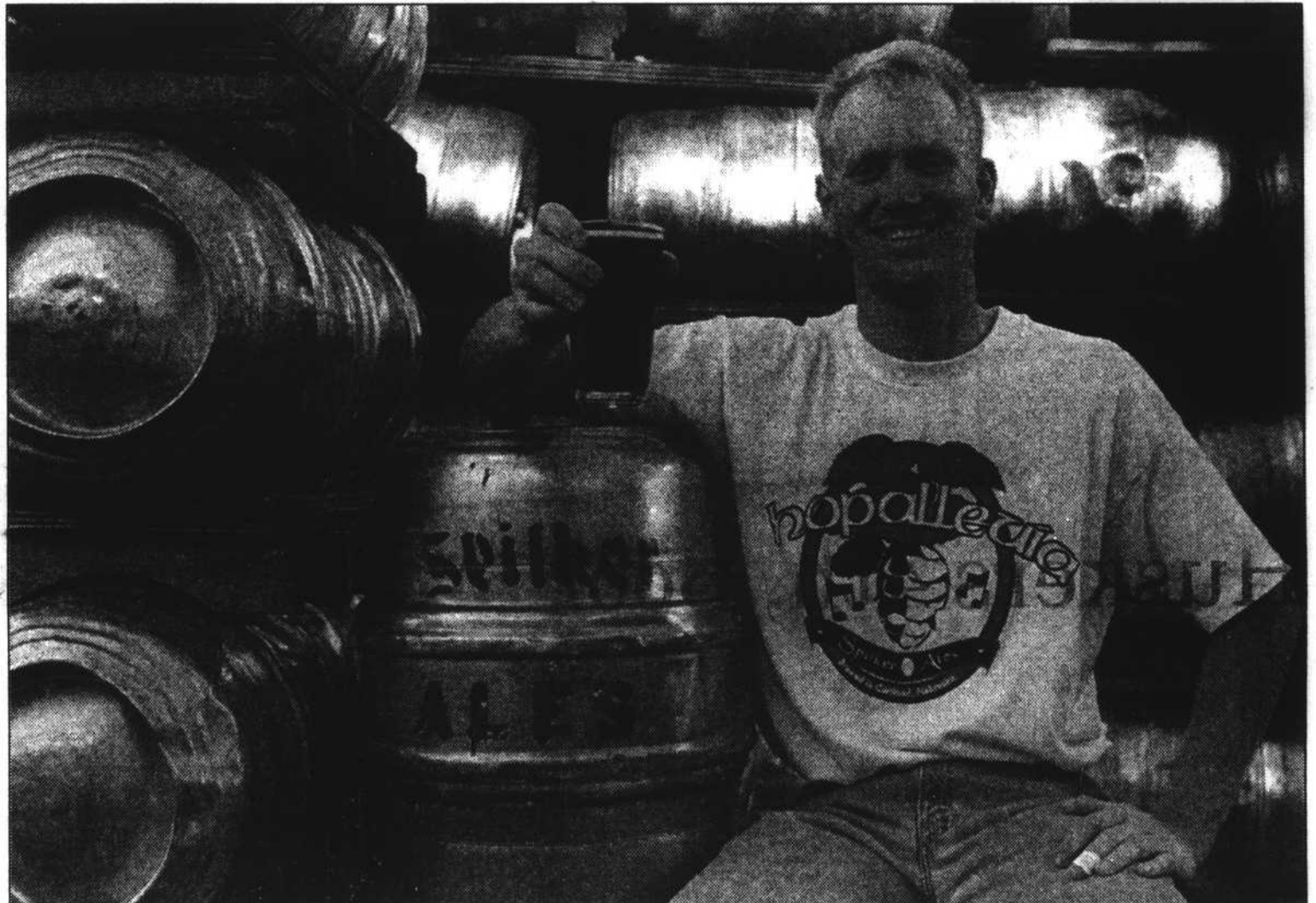
Along with adding business partner and fellow beer-enthusiast Bob Myers (who describes beer as "spiritual"), this expansion includes producing, bottling and distributing four unique flavors offered by the Cortland brewing factory.

The expansion will enable Spilker and Myers to "try to open people's minds and help bring a good beer culture to Nebraska," Spilker said.

Spilker says business is strong. He soon will be installing a second gravity system — the processor that brews the ales — and will bottle his beer in half-gallon "growlers," a moonshine jug-like bottle intended for retail purposes.

Beginning Nov. 1, customers can purchase these growlers as well as kegs directly from Spilker Ales. Previously, state law allowed the brewery only to sell its product to licensed alcohol distributors who then sold it to retailers.

Customers can purchase growlers and kegs directly from the brewery, 300 W. Fourth St., in downtown Cortland, for considerably less than what would be available through licensed distributors. The ales are available for \$5.50 per growler; kegs are \$80. The brewery will be open to the public from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Friday and noon to 9 p.m. Saturday.



RYAN SODERLIN/DN

SAM SPILKER RAISES a pint of Hopalleuia ale to the success of his Cortland brewery, Spilker Ales.

Strange brew?

Operating from a converted bank in Cortland's noticeably peaceful business district, Spilker Ales is making a lot of noise.

But the neighbors aren't complaining. Mel Rademacher — the owner of Cortland Bar and Grill, down the street from the brewery — offers draws of two of Spilker Ale's flavors — Monkey Wrench and Cortland Wheat. Rademacher said the beer was extremely popular among his customers.

"The minute it was in here we started selling it," he said. "Cortland Wheat is an even competitor with Busch Light and Miller High Life."

Spilker said local residents have been extremely supportive of his beer, both personally and financially.

"The community responded pretty well," he said. "It was like a spaceship landing at first, (but) I have converted a lot of Pabst Blue Ribbon and Budweiser drinkers to Cortland Wheat."

Rademacher said his patrons often include residents from surrounding communities and University of Nebraska-Lincoln students who come to drink the 75-cent local ales.

Although the price is appealing, the 22-mile trip isn't necessary for UNL students. Cortland Ales are served at many Lincoln drinking establishments, and the number is increasing as the brews' popularity grows.

Currently, Spilker ales are available on tap at Sandy's, Yiayia's Pizza Beer & Wine, Old Chicago and Duffy's Tavern, where, Spilker said, sales are brisk.

Duffy's bartender Brad Doyd confirmed the beer's popularity.

"As far as ales go, it's probably our top sell-

er at the moment," Doyd said of Spilker's Hopalleuia brew. "Everyone seems to enjoy it. It has a pretty full-bodied taste that some people like."

Because of the beer's relative anonymity, it took a few weeks to catch on, Doyd said. The first to try new beers usually is an older crowd with more money and a taste for more flavorful beer, he said. Students are more reluctant to break from the routine, but, Doyd said, people are catching on to Spilker ales.

"Monkey Wrench went over pretty well with the students once they knew what it was," he said. "Now that the company has been around for a while the name has spread and people are looking for it."

Indeed, in the 10 months Spilker Ales has been in operation, it has reached such obscure Nebraska communities as Wilber and Hickman, along with larger towns like Beatrice, Kearney and, recently, Omaha.

A large part of Spilker Ales' success comes from the variety of its four beers, which are geared to attract a broad spectrum of beer drinkers.

"We like to make extreme beers with extreme taste," Spilker said. "I want to make something that really stands out."

In the hopper

What Spilker describes as his most flavorful beer, Hopalleuia, undergoes cask conditioning, a process that kegs and ferments the hops inside the brew for two weeks before the ingredient is removed and the ale sold.

The result is a favorite of many of Spilker's customers as well as himself.

"It's the easiest to drink," he said. "We just

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SAM SPILKER
owner of Spilker Ales in Cortland

chug that stuff."

For beer drinkers who double as caffeine-fiends is XPO Stout, a dark brew roasted and boiled with espresso beans.

"It's morning beer," Spilker said.

Cortland Wheat is another favorite of his customers, he said. Brewed with orange peels and coriander, a parsley herb, Cortland Wheat is a Belgian ale that has done well in many bars, Spilker said.

Known for its literally conceived draft taps (which Spilker forged himself), Monkey Wrench is a brown ale with "a roasty, malted" flavor.

Spilker said competition from huge corporate breweries made starting his business tough.

To economize on start-up capital, Spilker improvised much of his equipment. Nearly all the brewery's tanks and kettles once held another popular beverage — but one less interesting for Spilker — milk.

"I bought all old dairy equipment from auctions and converted it," he said. "The brew kettle was tough."

Expecting greater demand for his beer, Spilker is currently renovating a storage house behind his brewery to shelter a second gravity system. Including a 1,000-gallon brew kettle and water tank, the new equipment will enable him to triple his output to 48 kegs per batch, with a maximum monthly production of 400 kegs.

Although Spilker is meeting the demand for his beer with his current equipment, he says the expansion will allow him to pursue other facets of his business.

"If I make any more beer right now it will be too hectic," he said. "I'm trying to plan for the future because I think I will be able to sell more, and it will free up time for things like marketing."

Although the business has yet to turn a profit, things are looking good for the fledgling brewery, Spilker said.

However, he is determined not to get too far ahead of himself. When asked about his plans for the future, Spilker relayed his impassioned goal.

"(I'll) try to make more beer, I guess."