

Still
Crazy
After
All
These
BEERS

**DO BREWSKIES
TASTE BETTER IF
YOU MAKE THEM
YOURSELF?**

WE GO INSIDE THE
QUIRKY WORLD OF
WESTCHESTER'S HOME-
BREWERS TO FIND OUT.

BY
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A

t first glance, the tasting room of the Captain Lawrence Brewing Company in Pleasantville could be a smaller, hipper Cheers.

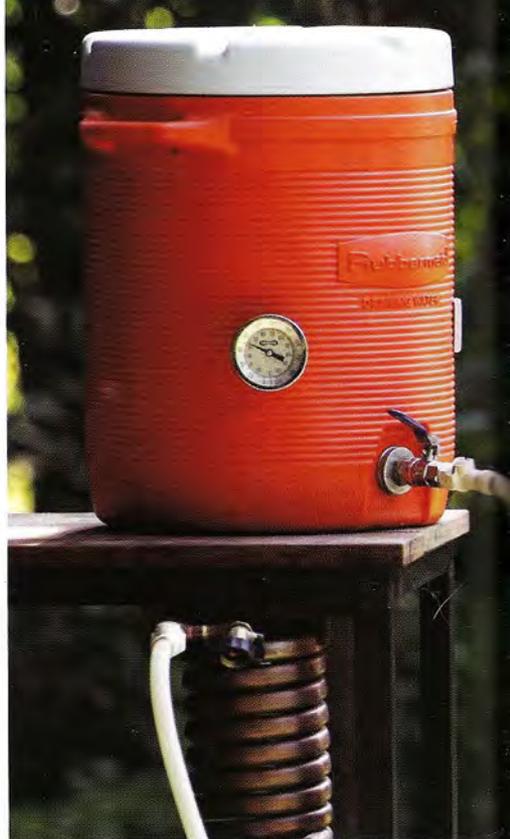
Twenty-somethings and soccer moms sip pints alongside middle-aged men in flannel, bobbing their heads to Bob Marley's "Trenchtown Rock." Behind the heavily lacquered, dark-wood bar, owner Scott Vaccaro, 28, wears a brewery T-shirt, spectacles, and a scruffy beard. He's refilling glasses and growlers for patrons and, yes, he knows everybody's name.

But if you turn around, the hunter-green carpet ends abruptly at the back doorway, giving way to clean, industrial concrete and a host of stainless-steel appliances that would put your Sub-Zero to shame. Enormous, shining silver vats almost reach the two-story-high ceiling, and serpentine tubes sprout from the bases and snake between them along the floor.

Pipes wind across the ceiling and down the walls. So much for Cheers. It may be a neighborhood pub up front, but back here the warehouse looks more like the set of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In 2006, *Beer Advocate* magazine named this futuristic setup one of the top five microbreweries in the country; it produces kegs that are tapped daily in more than 130 Westchester watering holes. Not bad for a brewery that opened its doors only two years ago.

And while the bars in Pleasantville charge upwards of \$5 for a pint, Vaccaro will serve as much as 48 ounces of beer for free. Captain Lawrence has a liquor license to produce and sell beer to take home, but "we're not allowed to sell it for consumption," Vaccaro says. So sidle up to the bar and ask for a sample, any sample, and he'll give you up to two four-ounce servings of each of the six brews on tap that day. "Most people don't hit the limit," he says, "but we're pretty lenient with it." When you decide which one you like best, buy a half-gallon growler for \$12, and refill it as often as you like for \$9. Or for a special occasion, take home a "Captain's Reserve," a champagne bottle Vaccaro hand-filled with a special brew of whatever he felt like making. It's the closest you'll get to homebrew without making it yourself.

But it wasn't always this way. Like most American craft-breweries, the Captain Lawrence Brewing Company had humble beginnings—in two buckets in the basement of a modest, one-family home on Captain Lawrence Drive in South Salem. As a senior at John Jay High School, before he was even old



enough to legally drink, Vaccaro brewed his first batch—"Cranberry Celebration Ale," on November 25, 1995—and he was hooked. That seems to be how the hobby goes: love at first sip.

And so it went for Vaccaro's friend Michael Vincent. The fit, baby-faced father of three from Briarcliff tried brewing his first batch 15 years ago, shortly after graduating from college. It didn't go well—he burned his can of malt syrup in the brew pot (he forgot to add water), turning a sweet, nutty brown ale into "a very smoky, black ale" (with hints of char and beef jerky). But while many would have given up, Vincent continued to invest up to 10 hours in each batch and sank a "conservatively estimated" \$10,000 into equipment because, as he puts it, "I'm a beer snob, and I don't use the B-word [Budweiser]."

Vaccaro may have turned his obsession into a profitable business, but for Vincent—and a half-million homebrewers nationwide—the only true payoff comes in the form of a pint glass. Still, after all the time, money, and effort required, the question remains: Does homebrew really taste better?

HITTIN' THE HOPS

I can think of only one way to find out: Make some myself. For provisions, I head to TrueValue in Eastchester. I must have passed the hardware store a hundred times on Route 22, unaware that it also houses one of the tri-state area's only homebrew shops—a basement repository found down a flight of stairs to the left of the entrance, marked only by a tiny sign. Glass jugs and sacks of grain are on display in the corner of the box-filled basement, and hundreds of dusty beer bottles line the rafters, bearing foreign labels and words. A rack holds



A growler of beer is a six-pack in a bottle. The TAP New York Festival named Captain Lawrence the best craft brewery in the Hudson Valley.



Briarcliff homebrewer Michael Vincent poses beside his beer sculpture, which was built on wheels so he can brew outside in the summer.

back-copies of magazines like *Zymurgy* and *Brew Your Own*. Also on sale, a dizzying array of homebrew gear—glass brewing vessels (carboys), valves of different shapes and sizes, and tubes of living yeast. It looks like—and in many ways is—a giant chemistry lab. I'm in way over my head.

John Fix, the aptly named hardware store owner, comes to my rescue. "Homebrewers tend to be gadget people, engineer types," he explains. And if there's ever been a "gadget man," Fix—sporting round-rimmed, glasses—is it. Like most homebrewers, he's neither frat boy nor brawny muscleman. He has a wiry frame, patient demeanor, and veteran's wisdom. He picked up the hobby in the '70s, and started selling supplies in his family-owned store to fuel his own ventures. Slowly, he gives me a comprehensive tour, handling everything (even the buckets) delicately, as though it might break at his touch. He answers all my dumb questions ("Why would you need a funnel?") and drafts a shopping list (see sidebar). My most important purchase, he counsels, will be the True Brew Equipment Kit. "Everyone starts out with the kits," Fix says. "Everything's measured out, labeled, and you get the recipe and instructions." Once brewers get a few batches under their belts, they learn from experience and begin to bend recipes, based on what they like. "Then, they order in bulk."

Fix estimates that about 30 budding brewers, from all over the tri-state region, visit his shop every week. He gets a bit more traffic in the big brewing months of October and November, when the temperature is ideal for fermentation. It might not sound like many, but most leave with the trunks of

their cars—or huge duffel bags on wheels—filled to capacity. They might spend hundreds, but Fix never intended for his homebrew shop to be a goldmine—the large hardware store upstairs pays the bills. "That's the way most of them are these days," he says, "bigger stores that sell supplies on the side." Homebrew shops used to be more common and autonomous, but today, "it wouldn't work as a storefront." Websites like morebeer.com and local microbreweries like Captain Lawrence offer advanced homebrewers a wider selection of ingredients.

But while other shops fade into obscurity, Fix's pet project is prominent in the brew world, especially among weekly brewers who special-order in bulk and beginners who require a bit of hand-holding. His customers are from all walks of life—stockbrokers, plumbers, and students—of all ages, including, yes, underage kids. "It's not illegal—there's no alcohol in anything I sell here," Fix says. Besides, he figures, if teens are investing the time and effort into the tedious process of brewing beer, they aren't doing it to abuse alcohol. "There are much easier ways to get beer."

Fix's first cautionary advice: "Doing it alone isn't much fun." So I enlist the aid of my boyfriend, Mike, a culinary whiz (who also likes to clean). "The biggest issues of flavor—when beer tastes bad, or just not right—link back to sanitation," Fix says. "Pathogens cannot survive in beer, so it can't get you sick. But it is crucial for taste's sake to keep bacteria out of the sugary, preservative-free wort." Point noted. To keep our wort, the nonalcoholic beer, from becoming a microbial inquisition, Mike and I scrub all our equipment. Four times. "Stop touching the stuff," Mike scolds, as I pick up our fermentation bucket by the inside. Oops.

getting started

Shopping is the easy part. All the supplies you'll need to get brewin'—except the pot, stove, and water—can be found in the True Brew Maestro kit (\$50, including a helpful beginners' guide) and a True Brew ingredient kit (\$25–\$32). But if you're a widget whiz, you can try your hand at assembling them yourself, using everyday items from the local hardware store:

SUPPLIES

Two 6.5-gal. buckets, one with an airtight, grommetted lid (\$10) and one without (\$7); or **two glass carboys with stoppers** (\$25 each), one for primary fermenting and the other for bottling

A three-piece air lock (\$3) to allow CO₂ to be released during fermentation without contaminating the beer by exposing it to the air

Hydrometer (\$5) to measure alcohol content of beer

"Fermometer" (\$3) to measure temperature of fermentation

Spigot (\$3) to drain beer from bottling bucket

Siphon kit (\$7) with a bottle-filler to move beer from buckets to bottles

Bottle brush (\$5) to clean bottles

Bottles (\$11 for 24) cannot be twist-off

Bottle caps (\$3 for 25)

Double-lever capper (\$12) to cap bottles

INGREDIENTS

(Yields five gallons—approximately 48 bottles, or two cases of beer)

3.3 lbs. Muntons malt extract (\$10)

1 lb. dried malts (\$5)

1 lb. grains (\$2)

1 oz. hop pellets (\$2)

5 oz. priming sugar (\$1)

A packet dry yeast (\$1)

TOTAL COST \$90

homebrew stores

CORNELL'S TRUE VALUE

310 White Plains Rd.; Eastchester
961-2400; brewshop.com

CORRADO'S WINE & BEER MAKING

600 Getty Ave.; Clifton, N.J.; 973-340-0848;
corradosmarket.com

MOREBEER.COM

We add all the ingredients and leave the wort to boil for half an hour. A pungent, sweet smell fills the house—a hybrid of soy sauce and coffee. Mike wrinkles his nose and says, “That smells like ... not beer.” We’re gone no more than five minutes, when we hear sizzling and popping noises coming from the kitchen. The contents of the pot had erupted and spilled over, the sticky brown wort congealing like glue on the white stove top. Frustrated, I toss the hydrometer case out of harm’s way. The cap pops off, and the thin glass tube explodes, shards cascading across the tile floor. I think of Fix and his delicate touch and realize I have forgotten to add the most essential ingredient—love.

A MAD SCIENCE

“Everyone who does this is passionate about it,” says Vincent, back at Captain Lawrence. “People either kick it up a notch, or they get bored.” He takes a long sip of Captain Lawrence Sunblock, which he describes as “light, citrusy, with touches of Curacao and coriander.” He swirls the brew like an expensive burgundy, takes deep sniffs, and, finally, a long sip. “My wife calls me a beer geek.” Vincent has traveled extensively as director of publication operations for publishing giant McGraw Hill, finding time on business trips to Europe and Asia to taste local brews and visit beer landmarks (such as the Belgian Trappist monasteries, where monks pioneered Dubblebocks and Pilsners centuries ago). “When I get back, I try to reproduce local recipes,” he says. “I’m like a mad scientist.”

Given that self-description, it’s fitting that Vincent has a well-equipped laboratory. He keeps his beer in a three-tap kegerator (a refrigerator that he modified to hold half-kegs) and brews it using a “beer sculpture” on wheels. “It’s truly a work of art,” he says of the self-contained brewing contraption, which is actually the handiwork of his friend, brew partner, and plumber/general contractor Sean McKee. Measuring six feet long, the propane-tanked, magnetically pumped machine yields up to 10 gallons of beer per batch (that’s four cases!). It took Vincent years to perfect this set-up, he says. “My attic is the land of misfit beer equipment.”

Unfortunately, in the world of homebrewing, it’s tough in Westchester to team up with fellow craftsmen like Vincent. It’s the only part of the Lower Hudson Valley that doesn’t have an organized brew group—the Ruffians meet in Rockland, the Hudson Valley Homebrewers meet in Poughkeepsie, the New York City Homebrewers Guild meets in Manhattan—but it’s not for lack of trying. The Westchester Homebrew Association met religiously through the 1980s and early ’90s, but eventually folded, due to poor turnout. Vaccaro tried to revive the tradition last year and held open meetings at Captain Lawrence. Vincent attended them all, but, Vaccaro laments, “Everyone around here just has so much going on, they don’t organize well.” He still knows “plenty” of Westchester brewers and provides “at least 20” of them with ingredients. But for most, like Vincent, it’s something they do on their own time.

Brewing is a “social event” for Vincent and his brew partners, Mike Hudzik and Sean McKee. “I have to schedule it way ahead of time,” he says. Between a full-time job, band practice (he drums), and his kids’ soccer, football, and lacrosse games (he coaches), he laments that they squeeze in a session every other month. But when they do break out the taps, they throw a keg party. Last summer, they organized “Hudzik-palooza” for more than 130 adults. They served their own beer, plus kegs of Blue Moon and Miller Light for people who would “waste” theirs by drinking it—the kind of people who, Vincent explains, “take a sip of good beer and say, ‘Ooo, this tastes too much!’” Even casual-brew Saturdays are a good time: They wheel the sculpture outside, pop open some brews, turn up the radio, and fire up the grill.

local brew pubs

CAPTAIN LAWRENCE BREWING CO.

99 Castleton St.
Pleasantville; 741-2337
captainlawrencebrewing.com

RAMAPO VALLEY BREWERY

143 Rte. 59; Hillburn; 845-369-7827
ramapovalleybrewery.com

DEFIANT BREWING CO.

6 E. Dexter Plaza; Pearl River
845-920-8602; defiantbrewing.com

A close-up photograph of a man with a goatee and dark hair, wearing a dark blue polo shirt with white stripes on the sleeve. He is holding a dark glass beer bottle in his right hand and pouring a golden beer into a tall, clear glass in his left hand. The beer has a thick white head of foam. The background is dark and out of focus.

Scarsdale homebrewer
Nikolaus Malkames,
who works at the popular
wine store Zachys, pours a
fresh pint of wheat ale
from a batch brewed
this fall.

REAL MEN DO THE DISHES

If there's any other skill that every homebrewer seems to possess, it's cooking. And not just barbecue. Yes, Vincent grills using his own dry rubs, but he also rolls his own sushi and specializes in Asian dishes like coconut lemongrass soup and stir-fry. Vaccaro makes excellent scallops in a balsamic reduction and ribs that fall off the bone. "We enjoy the finer things in life," says Vaccaro. "Forget fast food and bad beer—McDonald's and Budweiser."

Scarsdale homebrewer Nikolaus Malkames agrees, and only indulges in "quality fare." He, too, is a practiced cook, who specializes in desserts (he has his own crême brûlée blowtorch). Though he sells wine for Zachys in Scarsdale, he doesn't make his own wine. "Brewing beer is more of an art," he says. "You can take greater liberties with ingredients, and the process is less scripted, so you can create more diverse tastes." In his basement, next to the washing machine, he converted a full-size refrigerator into a three-soda-keg capacity kegerator, complete with tap and CO₂ carbonation system. Alongside, he also converted a utility closet into a temperature-controlled wine cellar that he keeps at a constant 55 degrees. While it's mostly used for storing valuable vintage bottles, he also uses it for "lagering," or making lager, a process that is far more involved and less forgiving than brewing a versatile nut brown. "The longer you let [beer] sit, the drier it gets," he explains. "The higher the temperature at fermentation, the more fruit you'll taste." To achieve the dry, bitter taste of traditional lager, fermentation takes at least a month, and the temperature can't rise above 55 degrees. Homebrewers who lager are a particularly patient breed.

Unlike other brewers, 24-year-old Malkames prefers to brew alone, seeking help from "whoever's around" only while siphoning, which requires more than one set of hands. At six-foot-four and barrel-chested, Malkames is an imposing figure, and even in a suit, tie, and shiny dress shoes, he could easily be mistaken for a "tough guy." But he is soft-spoken and meticulous, a man of few words when it comes to anything except wine and spirits. "I could talk about beer all day." This coming from a guy who has been brewing for only two years.

"You know that you can pitch your own yeast?" he says, knowing full well I have no idea what that means. "While it's fermenting, the gunky stuff that forms around the brim is yeast," a living, aerobic organism that will grow and reproduce if given enough oxygen. There are hundreds of strains, all of which taste different and determine if your beer is a pale ale or a porter. "Once you've found a strain that you like, you can scoop it out, and keep it in a jar in the fridge. Next time you make a batch, you won't have to buy new yeast," he explains. That's right: Malkames saves his fermented yeast. Frozen leftovers and back-yard composting seem tame by comparison.



- A Boil grains, malt, and hops in water for 30 minutes.
- B Seal the mixture (called wort) in a sterilized carboy and add yeast to ferment. After a week, siphon the beer into a fresh carboy, leaving the yeast sediment on the bottom.
- C Add priming sugar; siphon beer into bottles and cap them. Set aside to carbonate for two weeks or more. Then, drink up!

FIRST DRAFT

The week of waiting for my beer to ferment feels like an eternity. While I'm twiddling my thumbs, though, plenty is going down inside my beer bucket: The yeast is converting the sugary wort into alcohol. When that process finally finishes, what's left is a layer of sludge at the bottom—dead yeast. And that, my friends, has to go. I try my best to keep the bucket perfectly still, terrified that the slightest ripple will mix the sediment back into the beer. To separate the ooze from the booze, I have to siphon the alcoholic brew into a new, clean, sludge-free bucket.

Following Fix's advice with a grimace and some sputtering—"Gargle with vodka and suck on the tube"—I get a mouthful of the brown liquid to siphon out of the fermenting bucket. It looks like swampy chocolate milk, but to my surprise, it tastes like flat beer. When I'm done transferring the beer

between vessels, nearly an inch of fine, clay-colored sludge remains. Still, like a child who had crafted a fingerpaint masterpiece, I'm brimming with pride over the milk-chocolate beer. I cover it and bound out of the house, eager to show Malkames.

Then, the unthinkable. Walking to the car, I knock the flimsy, plastic spigot off the side of my bucket. Beer hemorrhages from the hole with force, gushing and splattering onto the pavement. Screaming, I drop to my knees, covering the hole with one bare hand as I grope the asphalt with the other. I find the mutinous spigot and jam it back in place. Beer-soaked and trembling, I survey the damages. About a gallon of my blood, sweat, and tears trickles through the cracks of the pavement and down the storm drain.

In clean clothes but still reeking of beer, I arrive at Malkames' house—fortunately without having a cop pull me over in transit. "It's just beer," I tell myself, but the words are empty. I finally understand the homebrewer's affliction: If you're going to put so much effort into something, you want the results to be perfect. "And when it goes wrong, it's painful," Malkames agrees. He offers sympathetic nods while listening to my tale of devastation and woe. "Only a homebrewer would understand."

A SMOOTH FINISH

Two weeks later, my nut brown ale is finally ready. I gather a small group of friends and family to taste it, begging them to be brutally honest. "Honestly, I'm wary," my mother says. I pour it into wine goblets for optimal aroma and watch it form a creamy, light-brown head. Though still cloudy, it smells of coffee and chocolate and tastes like a thicker, sweeter version of Newcastle. If I had let it ferment longer, Malkames tells me, it would have been dry and clear. So it wouldn't be "rated" well by a beer judge—or even a beer snob—but it's fresh and different, and the response is overwhelmingly positive (except from my mother, who would rather be drinking Chardonnay anyway). It's gone in hours, a pleasant—albeit quick—finish to an arduous project. But was it worth the hassle?

In a word: absolutely. Knowing the process that goes into making my beverage of choice has made me appreciate it more, and now I know what to do (and what not to do) to make a truly intoxicating ale. But I'm not quite ready to modify my laundry room and swear off light beer forever. More meaningful than the beverage, I enjoyed the company that came with making (and drinking!) it. I think back to Westchester homebrewers, a loose-knit but dedicated squad that sacrifices money, time, and effort to make something that can be picked up at 7-11 for \$5.99. Call them crazy, but they don't mind. They enjoy the fruits of their labor—quite literally—to the last drop. Because, as Vaccaro says, after all is said and done, "Life is too short to drink bad beer."

Cheers to that.

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