



True Brew

COBBER GETS SERIOUS ABOUT THE BUSINESS OF BEER

So this guy walks into a bar ...

The story is nearly as old as the craft of beer brewing itself. Remember, even Martin Luther was particular about his brew. In **Trevor Cronk**'s case, the story goes something like this:

So this Concordia graduate walks into a garage to brew a craft beer with three of his neighbors. It's pretty good, but the men continue to make adjustments: mash, boil, ferment and repeat. They start throwing backyard tasting parties with every new mix. Their neighbors are welcome for a small price – honest feedback on flavor, body, consistency and the other characteristics that make for a great beer.

BY MARTIN FREDRICKS

ABOVE: Lift Bridge Brewery's has five owners. Trevor Cronk '92 is pictured second from left.

Now, 12 years later, they own and operate Lift Bridge Brewing Co., one of the largest craft breweries in Minnesota by volume. Their beers – with whimsical names like Crosscut, Farm Girl and Hop Dish – are sold and savored in establishments across Minnesota, eastern North Dakota and parts of Wisconsin.

As with all good tales, and beers, there's more to it than that. You have to go back further, say to the early 1990s at Concordia, for the rest.

That's where Cronk '92 met his future wife, **Julie Seim** '94, a pre-med major who was on the path to becoming a dermatologist. While she was in medical school, Cronk worked as a long-term care facility administrator. She landed a fellowship in Australia for close to a year, and when they returned to the States they wound up in Atlanta. For several years he worked in marketing for the Atlanta Braves, Hawks and Thrashers. Kids were in the picture by then and being closer to home – Burnsville, Minn., for her, Chinook, Mont., for him – sounded good. They resettled to Stillwater and he joined the Minnesota Timberwolves marketing team.

When he walked into his neighbor's garage that day, Cronk carried with him the ingredients needed to launch and grow a successful company: a business administration degree from Concordia and nearly 10 years of management and marketing experience.

Cronk and his friends continued to refine their beer

until they were confident it was something others would buy, and buy some more. For the first couple of years, they brewed on a contract basis at a local facility and hit Minnesota's back roads to sell their product.

"There was a renaissance of sorts in craft brewing at the time, and the economy wasn't in the best shape," Cronk said. "People were looking local for options for food and entertainment. Our hand-crafted beer went right along with that."

Lift Bridge Brewing, named after the span between Stillwater and Houlton, Wis., introduced its first beer in 2008. The partners released new brews regularly after that and, Cronk said, "we built the business on a bootstrap." A fifth partner, a master brewer, joined the business in 2010.

Lift Bridge Brewing's output has grown by about 70 percent each year and today the company employs about 20 people, including chemist **Michael Connelly** '13. By the end of this year, the brewery will have produced 11,000-12,000 barrels of five year-round offerings and a bevy of seasonals, around 22 beers in all. One of the seasonals, Mini Donut, has become a favorite at the Minnesota State Fair.

The Lift Bridge Brewing taproom, which opened in 2011, provides a more relaxing environment. It's a cross between a German brauhaus, a Rocky Mountain lodge and a Minnesota ice house, with a split-wood bar, picnic-style tables and taps drawing eight different beers straight from the chiller out back. The comfortable

atmosphere draws a laid-back, neighborhood crowd as a rule, but the place can get downright boisterous during the community parties the partners often throw. Regardless, it's always warm and welcoming, with fresh beer flowing into pints and growlers and accompanying banter across the room.

Two more Concordia graduates, **Chris Opsahl** '91 and **Robert Powers** '92, are among the regulars. They own Studio 2, a design and marketing firm in St. Paul that's been working with Cronk and his partners from the get-go.

"Each of them brings something valuable to the business and they're a good, down-to-earth bunch of guys," Opsahl said. "We tried to work that into what Lift Bridge Brewing looks and feels like, along with Stillwater's historical vibe and strong brewing tradition."

After seven years of building their own traditions, Cronk and his partners have proven one thing beyond all doubt: Lift Bridge Brewing is no joke. The company with the old-school feel, unconventionally named beers and a view of its namesake bridge is here to stay.

"We've been successful because, first, the beer tastes really good," Cronk said. "We've been able to stay true to ourselves and build a business that complements the fabric of this community."

As it turns out, Trevor Cronk was the guy who walked into a bar. ♦

THE STAPLES

LIFT BRIDGE BREWINGS'S FIVE YEAR-ROUND BEERS



Farm Girl

A Belgian saison named after the wife of one of the partners. "It's our flagship beer and the name reminds me of my Montana roots," Cronk says.



Hop Dish

"A potluck of seven varieties of hops," this India pale ale is like a church-basement hotdish, so tasty everyone comes back for more.



Crosscut

A pale ale whose name is a nod to Stillwater's logging roots.



Chestnut Hill

A nut brown ale named for the rise on the west side of the Stillwater Bridge between Minnesota and Wisconsin.



Getaway

A crisp, well-balanced pilsner so named because, Cronk says, "We like to believe people come to Stillwater for a getaway from the everyday."