

OF ALES, PORTERS, AND STOUTS

DAVE BURNS ('95, MS '96, AND KELLOGG '02) DRIVES LAKE BLUFF BREWING FROM PERSONAL VISION TO AWARD-WINNING ENTERPRISE.



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Had Dave Burns known back in 2011 what the Lake Bluff Brewing Company would become, he confesses he might have done things differently when launching the microbrewery.

“This was all about providing good beer for our friends and neighbors in a comfortable, relaxed setting,” Burns says. “It was supposed to be a hobby on the side. It became a real business with serious legs.”

In fact, since Burns co-founded the Lake Bluff Brewing Company five years ago, it has continued to attract a loyal and growing following in Lake Bluff, a cozy Chicago suburban bedroom community of some 5,700 residents located about 20 miles north of Burns’ alma mater in Evanston.

The microbrewery has also gained national recognition. In 2013, Lake Bluff Brewing captured a gold medal at the United States Open Beer Championships for its Kosmonaut Russian Imperial Stout, a hearty brew aged in whiskey barrels and named after Burns’ beloved dog, Kosmo. In succeeding championships, the microbrewery scored bronze medals for its Velvet Hammer Imperial Vanilla Porter in 2014 and for its Gamma Ray American Pale Ale in 2015.

“This was certainly beyond our expectations,” Burns says.

Back in 2009, when Burns and his home-brewing neighbor Rodd Specketer first discussed opening a microbrewery while sampling home-crafted beers around a fire pit, their vision was less about launching the next Sierra Nevada or Sam Adams and more about sharing one-of-a-kind concoctions with the locals.

“We thought a microbrewery could add to the vitality of our community. That was really the beginning as we saw it,” says Burns, who studied mechanical engineering at Northwestern and now works as a project manager at pharmaceutical company AbbVie.

As the two friends’ budding venture unfolded, Specketer, a financial pro by trade, handled front-of-the-house duties, while Burns managed back-of-the-house operations, including brewing novel beers.

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“From time to temperature, acidity to ingredients, you change just one little thing and it’s a different result.” It was also at Northwestern that Burns met his wife, Nisha (’96, Kellogg ’02), a chemical engineering major.

Respecting the rich traditions of craft brewing while keeping pace with the fast-changing industry, Lake Bluff Brewing gained an enthusiastic following for its “foundational beers” as well as its “Brewers handles,” the rotating specials that showcase the microbrewery’s creativity.

Finding the establishment more of a tasting room than a full-fledged restaurant—there are only 30 interior seats, a small patio, and no in-house foodservice—the local crowd began referring to Lake Bluff Brewing Company as “our place.”

“And, honestly,” Burns admits, “that’s all we ever wanted.”

In early 2016, Burns recognized that the microbrewery, with its swelling fortunes, had become a far larger endeavor than he ever imagined. The timing to sell was perfect, so he and Nisha, an AbbVie marketing executive who had helped concept the early branding efforts, sold their ownership stake to the establishment’s master brewer.

“It was time,” Burns says, “and I’m proud of what we created and excited to see how the new blood takes it to the next level.”

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