

## In the Night Shift Kitchen

What would you call a gathering of 100 twenty-somethings and several kinds of beer held in a bare bones kitchen on the second floor of a Ball Square, Somerville duplex? If the words “keg party” come to mind, well, guess what? Wrong answer.

The better reply would be a strictly focused beer tasting night, one arranged by the young men who are working on founding a brand new Somerville-based brewing company, Night Shift Brewing. These tastings are all serious business for Robert Burns, Mike O’Mara, and Michael Oxtan, the forces behind a fledgling company poised to enter the local microbrew and craft beer scene by early fall.

And however much their completely urban apartment with its rabbit warren collection of rooms and alcoves and narrow hallways looks like home to several busy young men, make no mistake: within the daily chaos is a vibrant test kitchen/laboratory set up to create high quality, expectation-defying beer.

In the Night Shift test kitchen with two of the company’s founding members on a recent Saturday morning, I admit I don’t know too much about the beer brewing process. Michael and Mike are quick to give me a rundown, taking turns to teach me the basics. Grains are crushed and made into a porridge with hot water. This sits to develop the sugars, the liquid becoming what is called the “wort” (the sugar water that will be fermented). The wort is then boiled with hops to add bitterness, developing beer’s distinctive flavor and aroma. The resulting liquid is chilled quickly and Belgian brewers’ yeast is added for the fermentation process.



As the two Michaels talk (Michael Oxtan, left, Mike O’Mara, right), I am struck by the contrast of youthful exuberance with a single-minded dedication to the process that seems well above their calendar years. Both are 26. Clearly they know what they are doing, in expert fashion. Where did the interest start, I ask; how did the expertise develop?

“I grew up with Rob (Burns, not present for the interview),” O’Mara tells me, adding, “Rob is the brewmaster. He’s been reading about brewing and experimenting with it for years. He got us interested.” When the three, kept motivated by Rob’s enthusiasm for the activity, began brewing together in college, they embraced the learning curve.

“Our first batches had your basic apple juice taste,” O’Mara says with a grin.

But all were captivated by the early efforts because they had created something that could be delicious and endlessly variable as well, with just a few raw ingredients and their own hands. They were also captivated by the idea of having control over their own work. Oxtan explains, “We all have day jobs, which is why we decided on the name ‘Night Shift.’ The brewing is our business, what we do for ourselves after a day of working for other people.”

When it comes to the business, each principal takes a leadership role. Burns assumes the lead in brewing experimentation, dreaming up batch recipes based on his extensive knowledge of and

experience with the process. O'Mara concentrates his efforts on the business aspects: researching and scouting industrial space, working with real estate agents, visiting banks and lawyers. Oxton, the English major, writes mouth-watering marketing copy, describing products that "ooze juicy hoppiness" and "emphasize biscuity, bready, bold flavors."

Just as often, though, the lines between individual concentrations blur, and herein lies the secret to their success as partners. Working as a team, one person's effort or suggestion or idea often sparks the others to try something new. Soon after, all three are working cooperatively and pushing each other and their beer further forward than any of them imagined.

"We'll brew something, taste it, and then the next day exchange as many as thirty emails about what we might do differently. 'Should we add lemongrass next time? Or 'How about ginger?' Then we'll meet up again at home and continue to talk," O'Mara explains.

Daytime jobs? Brewing at night? All business, all the time, I remark.

Oxton nods. "Ultimately, Night Shift is our opportunity to work for ourselves, to be our own bosses while doing what we love," he says.

They do this work they love in a city that plays home to many small business endeavors. Enterprises pop up and thrive around here, I note, counting off a few on my fingers to make my point. What attracts start-ups to Somerville, I wonder.

Oxton, answers quickly. "Somerville is a dense city with a close community atmosphere. A very active close community. Somerville Local First has been extremely helpful to us and others who are getting their businesses off the ground." O'Mara agrees that Somerville Local First has been essential to Night Shift. "Joe Grafton has pointed us to local banks for help with financial matters and to local advisers for legal assistance."

The organization was founded in 2008 to help small business owners to connect with others in order to "build a sustainable local economy and vibrant community" in the city. Through these partnerships, local business grows, the city of Somerville strengthens, and everyone wins.

Once industrial brewing and bottling space is found and production is in full swing, the Night Shift partners see themselves further extending and cementing these budding neighborhood relationships, joining up with local promoters, distributors, and restaurants. "It's written in our business plan that we will use local products and suppliers whenever possible," O'Mara says. Already sticking to the plan in these early recipe experiment stages, the young men use nearby Taza Chocolate and Mem Tea Imports products to flavor brews.

"And when we begin experimenting with seasonal fruit beer, we'll find and use only locally grown, seasonal berries and fruit," Oxton notes.

Night Shift's local and seasonal commitment will be central to their success. Mark my words, it will be these local flavors and the partners' assured use of them that will distinguish Night Shift beers from other craft beers.

Michael, Mike, and Rob each possess sophisticated, finely honed palates that have been years – and beers – in the making. Over these years they have learned to discern the subtle flavors found in beer, and this learning process is ongoing as they continue to taste, keep tasting notes, and cultivate the industry tasting lingo. In addition, all have been blessed with an instinct for pulling together taste combinations by imagining through their taste memories what might work together in a finished, actual product. (Pictured right: various hops)



“We start out with a flavor profile in mind and we brew to get to that taste,” O’Mara says. “We’ll make three buckets of one basic recipe then tweak each to have three variations. We know when something isn’t just right and we keep working the recipe until we have the result we’ve held in our minds all along.”

And here’s where the beer tasting focus group nights factor in.

During the described development process, “we’ll have up to 100 people over for a tasting party,” Oxton tells me. “We hang up beer posters in the kitchen to advertise what’s on tap for the night, then we hand out comment cards as people arrive. We get about two-thirds of them back, plus we talk to people while they’re tasting. The feedback informs our final recipes.”

Oxton and O’Mara ask if I’d be up for a sample, and of course I say yes. I’m not sure what kind of help I can be, I tell them; by their standards, I’m pretty much a beer novice. No worries, they assure me as they pour tasting glasses of the British-style malt they call SMaSH (Single Malt and Single Hop), and their richer, bolder Taza Chocolate Stout. After a sip or two, I pronounce the SMaSH refreshing with a summer-friendly lightness and citrus quality.

“Imagine it with the lemongrass added,” O’Mara says, referring to a planned recipe change. I do, and agree with him that lemongrass’s sharp tang will both complement and make more complex the brew’s inherent citrus freshness.

Reaching for the chocolate stout, I express my apprehension. Stouts, I say, can be too heavy and murky for my taste. Little do I know, I’m about to be surprised.

“Wow! This has good body, but it’s actually really refreshing too!” With the second sip I note the stout has a good amount of coffee flavor in the finish. “Coffee?” I wonder aloud.

“There’s chicory mixed into the brew along with the cacao nibs,” O’Mara explains. “That’s why you get the coffee taste.”

“Chicory and cacao nibs. This tastes nothing like I thought it would,” I say.

Oxton smiles. “That’s why there’s more than just one meaning to the name Night Shift,” he says. “We’re also shifting ingredients, adding twists to the traditional flavors in the hopes of shifting the consumer’s expectations. Whichever brew you taste, you’ll be challenged and surprised in some way by our beer.”

He's absolutely right, you will be. For novices and connoisseurs alike, the beer world is about to get a whole lot richer thanks to Night Shift Brewing.

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