



It's in the can

Big dreams and hard work have P.E.I. microbrewery toasting its own success

By Sandra Phinney



In Rick Yancey's novel, *The 5th Wave*, one of his characters says, "What were they thinking? It's an alien apocalypse! Quick, grab the beer!"

Although folks don't need that kind of prompt to imbibe, beer aficionados are latching onto craft beers like never before. Enter The Prince Edward Island Brewing Company (established in 2012); it's not only pumping out award-winning beers, but it's also become a much-talked-about destination. Locals are heading there after work and on the weekends; bookings for parties and events are stacking up; and tourists are sending home "wish-you-were-here" tweets.

How did this overnight success story come to be? Well, it didn't actually happen overnight. The company's slogan (Dream Big. Work Hard. Have a Beer.) is not an accidental tag line. It's an everyday occurrence, and keeps propelling the company and its products forward.

Dream big

This story actually started back in 1997 when the company's founding partner, Kevin Murphy, started Murphy's Brewing Company next to the Lone Star Café on University Avenue in Charlottetown. Three years later, the brewery morphed into Gahan House Brewery and eventually established an off-site location to bottle its popular products. Fast forward to 2012 when Murphy teamed up with Jeff Squires to form the P.E.I. Brewing Company.

But first, in October 2011, Kevin and his wife Kathy purchased one-way tickets to San Francisco. They bought a car in Reno, then took a month to drive back to P.E.I., venturing up the west coast to Vancouver, then across Canada back to Charlottetown. It wasn't a mere vacation. "When we started the new brewery, we wanted it to be special and one-of-a-kind. We also wanted to be inspired, so we visited 35 breweries during the trip, and got to see both the best and worst," Murphy says.

By the time the couple returned, they knew for a certainty they could build a world-class brewery, one that would produce great beers and be a tourist destination. Check and check. The dreaming part hasn't stopped. It includes winning awards. Check. It includes exporting to other provinces and capturing a significant market share. Double check. (Worthy of note: last summer, the company was able to capture over seven per cent of the local beer market, unheard of for a single craft brewery.)

Work hard

"In order to succeed in anything, 'work hard' is part of the equation," the Island entrepreneur says, "But with the start-up aspect of the brewery, we knew that we'd all have to work doubly hard." One of many examples occurred last summer when everyone was trying to keep up with the demand and

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get a shipment bottled, packaged and placed on a truck heading to Alberta. "All hands were on deck working 16 hours a day, working hard and having fun."

Murphy adds that another ingredient of working hard is to keep believing in your vision, in spite of tough times, financing woes, or production issues. "But you need to always give comfort to your suppliers and customers. They need to buy into what you are doing. You want them to be part of the journey and success."

Have a beer

Murphy says that "Have Fun" could have just as easily rounded off the equation. "But 'Have a Beer' says the same thing and it's more fitting for a brewery to make that statement. We live and breathe this culture and have fun with what we do."

Part of the pleasure is riding the wave of popularity related to artisan products that's unfurled during the past five-10 years. Consumers are now looking for quality and different tasting beers, like never before. It's tied in with the notion that "local" has risen to star status, along with a culinary scene that is keen on matching wines and craft beers with everything from appetizers to desserts. Put them together, and it's clear that the stars are lining up for owners of companies and their staff who can dream big, work hard and make time for a well deserved beer.

Jeff Squires, president of P.E.I. Brewing Co., wears many hats. At

any given time he can be giving a tour to a potential client, or chatting with a customer at the bar, explaining why the perfect head on a glass of beer should be two fingers of foam ("Foam allows the aroma of the beer to come out. No foam, no aroma.") You might also see him around 4:45 a.m. en route to the hockey rink to coach his sons, or hunched over his desk at the brew company at 6 a.m. pouring over his next marketing strategy.

"It's about more than making and marketing beer. Part of the beer history of the province is telling the story from the 16th century up to modern day. It's a compelling tale. Who would have guessed, for example, that Sir George Coles, one of the early premiers of the province, was also a brewer?" Squires asks. "Or that P.E.I. was the first province into prohibition and the last province out ... 92 years later!"

Squires credits part of the success to having the right people, and creating the right products. "We operate on a collaborative model. You can't do it all yourself, so you need to make sure you involve the right people. Then let them do their jobs." After that, you need to produce a top quality product. The company has its own award-winning recipes, but they are always creating new brews to tempt the palate, and raise the bar.

For example, the company hired Brian Watson to collaborate on a beer called Beach Chair Lager. "Brian is one of the foremost brewmasters in the world. That's pretty neat that a P.E.I. company worked with a brewer from New Zealand to come up with a great liquid," Squires says. "It's also the first canned product from a craft brewery in the Maritime provinces."

A sidebar to this story involves how the brew company uses equipment made in P.E.I. by Diversified Metals Engineering Ltd. "DME is one of the foremost producers of brewing equipment in the world. So the fact that we have a world-class brewery located in Charlottetown, with a company that makes brewing equipment just a few blocks away, is a pretty neat part to this story. This amazes people."

In Seattle Washington, craft beer represents over 40 per cent of all beer sales. British Columbia weighs in around 20 per cent, Ontario around six per cent and, Atlantic Canada around four per cent – which means the timing is perfect for P.E.I. Brewing Co.

It's a balancing act that requires the skills of an expert navigator. "We're managing growth, export markets, bigger and more equipment, new staff," says Squires. "It's always a perfect storm. There's a lot coming at you. So it's important that you try to keep all these pieces fitting together to get where you need to go."

Although Squires doesn't have a crystal ball, it's clear that the company is on the cusp of growth and expansion. "People shop for beer now. They'll use a cart and pick up one of this kind and one of that kind. They are looking for beers with flavour, and something different. So we will definitely be putting out more beer." •

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