

Sips and tips: Locals meet up to discuss, taste beers

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Abstract: According to original member Chris Simonsen, the Sartell-based connoisseur club began with a chat at the now-closed St. Cloud bar Tav on Germain in fall 2008. Goals: Besides continuing to expand their palates, Simonsen said the Brew Hoppers want to make their website a destination increasingly filled with information -- the educational aspect of their function in the area.\n

Full Text: Special to the Times

Organization: Brew Hoppers.

Origins: According to original member Chris Simonsen, the Sartell-based connoisseur club began with a chat at the now-closed St. Cloud bar Tav on Germain in fall 2008. A handful of friends joined Simonsen for a Schell's brewery tasting event, and he said an idea emerged within the group: "Hey, we should start a beer club."

They decided to dedicate one night a month to trying new ales, lagers, porters and more. Pooling resources could help them taste "all the good beers out there without going to the bars all the time," Simonsen said.

Mission and motivations: The Brew Hoppers started as a way to try the more eclectic beers available in Minnesota, Simonsen said, but there is "more to it than just sampling beer." As the club now boasts four home brewers -- an increase from an original two -- much knowledge of beer creation spreads throughout club members' heads.

What started as informal, friendly discussions of the beer-making process "evolved into educating ourselves about the history of the beers," Simonsen said. The beer club continued to change and began collecting dues after the first year.

Opportunities: The main focus of the beer club is monthly beer tastings, which take place every third Thursday. Simonsen said a member volunteers to host each gathering, which sees the club share about a half-dozen beers between 8-12 people. After enjoying a few ounces and cleansing their palates with cheese or crackers, members move on to the next selection. When they get through all the beer, they enjoy a meal, courtesy of the host.

The Brew Hoppers also schedule annual trips to area breweries. Members visited Duluth, Minneapolis and New Ulm in recent outings and are planning a drive to Milwaukee this year.

In addition to new sips and weekend trips, the club hosts an annual Lager Fest in the summer -- a name that is "kind of odd for a crew of us who like craft beers," Simonsen said. At the block party-type events, the Brew Hoppers bring together live music, fresh food, beer and even athletics, as the event includes a "difficult" jogging contest, Simonsen said.

Members: Eight area residents claim regular membership to the Brew Hoppers group, Simonsen said, with thrill-seeking sniffer owners traveling from Spicer, Rice, Buffalo and around the St. Cloud area to attend Thursday tastings.

Community function: Simonsen said that while he wished he could brag about charitable donations the club has made, the Brew Hoppers main community impacts thus far have been entertainment, trade and education -- three voluntary contributions, nonetheless.

When a month includes five Thursdays, he said, group members gather for an outing to a local bar or restaurant. With significant others and friends, those group numbers swell to 20 people at times, Simonsen said.

"When we go out, we bring a lot of business to establishments," he said. Many that have catered to the craft beer-drinking crowd -- like the House of Pizza in Sartell -- see regular business from the Brew Hoppers. The club also tries to sample beers available from local retailers. This effort involves both courtesy and care: Simonsen said club members want to support the area business community by encouraging future purchases, simply by the brews they choose to try.

Goals: Besides continuing to expand their palates, Simonsen said the Brew Hoppers want to make their website a destination increasingly filled with information -- the educational aspect of their function in the area.

The club hopes to turn their database of more than 170 tasted beers into an online web for community reviews, and they also have continued to work for a partnership with area bars to provide a list of "what's on tap."

Funding: Members pay a monthly due of \$15 to participate in the tastings, Simonsen said. The club uses those funds to pay for their annual trips.

For information: Visit the club's website at www.brewhoppers.com for past reviews, club news and even member biographies.

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