

Something's brewi

TONY POER

As the saying goes in California, it takes a lot of beer to make good wine.

When brewer Matt Cromwell was learning the ropes early in his career, it was a mantra that resonated with him. Among his former customers at Silverado Brewing Company in St. Helena were many Napa Valley winemakers and their crews.

A decade later, Cromwell, his two business partners, and their multi-tasking general manager are putting their combined talents to work at Tannery Bend Beerworks, Napa Valley's newest beverage outlet not in the business of crushing grapes. Those Upvalley cellar folk left high and dry by Silverado Brewing's closure in 2012 now have a very good reason to venture

Tannery Bend nano-brewery brings high-quality ethic to small-batch beer production

to downtown Napa, where Cromwell's micro-brewery creations await them.

Technically, Tannery Bend Beerworks is a "nano-brewery," at least as defined by the Brewers Association of Boulder, Colorado, which assigns categories according to production size. As the word suggests, a "nano" like theirs is a really small operation. "But generally, we just refer to ourselves as a brewery," Cromwell said on a recent Monday morning, a

little more than a week after Tannery Bend's grand opening.

The brewery and tasting room occupy a compact but carefully laid-out industrial space on the Napa River side of South Coombs Street. Seated at the poured concrete bar with his general manager and fellow Vintage High School alumnus, Mike Schneiders, the 34-year-old brewer talked about the origins of their project.

"We opened on March 18th

— A day that will live in infamy," he said, sighing deeply while Schneiders laughed. Reminded by his GM that it was just after St. Patrick's Day, Cromwell exclaimed, "Thank god! We already had people hanging from the rafters. We didn't need that."

Whatever the green beer offerings in Napa around the Irish holiday, it wasn't happening on South Coombs. The enthusiastic locals who descended on Tannery Bend for its official first day enjoyed choices like Belgian-style Saison, Session IPA, and Belgian Winter Ale, three of the nine beers Cromwell brewed for the first week of business.

"We tend to circle back a lot to Belgian beers, because I personally like Belgian beers," he said. "We use a lot of saison yeasts, but really



iving in south Napa

we're open to doing anything." His customers' reactions—to anything and everything—during those first days were apparently quite positive: Tannery Bend sold out of most of Crowell's brews and left him "scrambling to get the production back up again."

If the brewer and his partners, husband-and-wife Oenotri restaurant owners Tyler Rodde and Lauren Duncan, were looking for some reassurance that Napa is ready for a new craft brew venue, they haven't been disappointed. In fact, their decision to locate at the south end of downtown was largely informed by this calculation: "We firmly believe that with the growth downtown Napa is experiencing, it's going to have to bleed out somewhere, and we think that this direction is probably where downtown is starting to head," Cromwell said.

Comparing it to the more central section of downtown, he described the residential and business mix of the riverside location they selected as "also a real neighborhood, with a lot of locals who are looking for something on this side of town."

"We're starting to see them come in, and they're very excited about having a place in their neighborhood."

The route the young brewer and entrepreneur took to arrive at a former tannery on the banks of the Napa River was deliberate, if slightly circuitous.

After graduating in 2005 from UC Santa Barbara with a degree in political science, Cromwell moved back home to Napa and got a job at Silverado Brewing Company. As he put it wryly, it was "to try and not go to law school." The St. Helena brewers took note of his interest in the brewing side of the business

and kept him on for seven years. From there, he and his wife moved to Chicago for two years, where he attended Siebel Institute, the 145-year-old beer-making school. "I wanted to just kind of round out my education," he explained.

In the meantime, chef Tyler Rodde, who is another Vintage High alum, and his wife, Lauren, had opened Oenotri to much local and Bay Area acclaim for their southern Italian cooking. Connecting with his brewer friend after the Chicago program, Rodde mentioned to Cromwell that the couple wanted to expand the restaurant to a space next door and do brewing on-site to acquire what's known as a "Type 75" liquor license, designed for small breweries. They would eventually win a full restaurant-type license instead, but, according to Cromwell, "by that point we had all talked about beer so much, we were kind of in love with the idea of opening a brewery."

Between the three partners, many ideas were floated for what the operation would look like. Cromwell recounted a period starting in 2012 when "the brewery idea literally changed shape probably a dozen times."

"It really depended on what site we were looking at, and finally when we found this place, the idea just kind of coalesced to what it's become," he said. "It's a fairly sizable production space for such a small footprint, and then the small tasting room with the menu that we have now. But it took a good five years."

To complement Tannery Bend's concise but highly creative bar menu designed by Rodde's sous-chef, Matt Lee, Cromwell aspires to a food-friendly style of beer-making, saying, "If I can't eat while I'm having that beer, it's kind of a lost opportunity."

But it has as much to do with business strategy as craftsmanship, since a big part of Mike Schneiders' responsibility is to wholesale Tannery Bend's 5- and 15-gallon kegs to other bars and restaurants in the



J.L. Sousa, Register

Tannery Bend Beerworks co-owner and brewer, Matt Cromwell, left, and co-owner Tyler Rodde in the brew house of the South Coombs Street brewery.



J.L. Sousa, Register

Tannery Bend Beerworks co-owner Tyler Rodde, right, in the brewery which recently opened on South Coombs Street. General Manager Mike Schneiders works in the background.

LEFT: Tannery Bend Beerworks General Manager Mike Schneiders, left, and co-owners Tyler Rodde, center, and Matt Cromwell, who also serves as the brewer, at the South Coombs Street brewery

J.L. Sousa, Register

Bay Area. So the GM, a former beverage manager at Norman Rose Tavern, has worked his connections to land his boss's beers on a variety of tap lists, from Napa Palisades on Main Street to Central Market in Petaluma to Novy Restaurant in San Francisco's Noe Valley.

"Being a beverage buyer, I've been able to meet a lot of people in the same position," the 30-year-old Schneiders said. "So I'm just relying on those kinds of relationships to

get my foot in the door, and then letting the product speak for itself."

Even minus a full menu, Cadet Wine Bar in the heart of downtown Napa is one of Schneiders' best accounts. As Colleen Fleming, the co-owner of Cadet, said, "I see similarities in wine and beer all of the time." She takes an evenhanded approach in her selection process for both beverages, noting

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that Cromwell's beers "are very balanced."

"I'm personally very excited about the Tannery Bend beer because, like with the wines we carry, there's a lot of great flavor, but there's balance and lower alcohol, so you can enjoy it more. It's not over-bearing like a lot of current West Coast IPAs, so I see similarities."

Of course, the brewery's most dependable customer has been their sister establishment on First Street, Oenotri, where Schneiders pointed out that "the scope of the beverage sales has been really nice."

"We don't need people to go there and drink a lot of the beer," Cromwell added, "but if every once in a while they're having our beer instead of a cocktail or they're substituting it for a glass of wine or an after-dinner drink, and they're happy with it, then we're doing our job, and that's really been the case so far."

Back at Tannery Bend, the Monday morning vibe was calm, and the rafters were undisturbed. Whether empty or full of customers, there's a stripped-down aesthetic that Duncan and Rodde, who designed the tasting side of the room, seem to have chosen on purpose to draw people's attention to Cromwell's beer. "We're a neighborhood hang-out that's kind of funky and industrial, and people accept that," the brewer said, looking around the room.

Following that theme, décor in the space, aside from gleaming stainless steel fermentation tanks, mainly consists of a series of cornhole boards on display. Napa artist Nate Geare has created what he describes on his website as a combination of "Film Noir, street art, and the backyard college game of cornhole into a sophisticated look at contemporary Pop Art Americana." Several colorful wooden boards line the walls. Each is the size of a portrait painting—though with a "cornhole" in it—and references a contemporary Hollywood movie. If customers' conversations about the beer happen to trail off, the artwork provides something else to talk



Tannery Bend Beerworks

Submitted image



Tony Poer



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Tannery Bend General Manager Mike Schneiders writes down beers on a mat for a tasting flight of beer.

about, for sure.

"It fits our aesthetic here," said Cromwell. "Kind of funky, kind of pop art. It's kind of like us: done well but not taking itself too seriously."

Schneiders noted the only downside to the artwork is having to tell their customers that they can't actually play cornhole—not yet, at least. But with Geare working on a pair of cornhole sets for the planned front patio space that will almost double Tannery Bend's seating capacity this summer, the nano-brewery is becoming a viable downtown

business that also happens to be a beer-lover's playground.

Cromwell then offered a final thought. "In the last five years or so, you're hearing a lot less of people coming to Napa and saying, 'I'm here for good wine,' and you're starting to hear more and more, 'I'm here for good things.' Whether that means it's a dining experience, it's a cocktail experience, it's a wine experience, and now it can be beer experience too. It's a little bit of everything. People aren't pigeonholing themselves into coming to Napa just for wine; they want a more

well-rounded experience. They're just into well-made stuff."

All things being equal, and with California practically awash in craft beer these days, might artisan brewers like Matt Cromwell start reaching for a cold bottle of sauvignon blanc around 5 p.m.? The short answer is probably not—though for beer makers in the middle of wine country, it's always an option. In the meantime, Matt Cromwell and company are learning to see the big picture when it comes to micro-brewing, from small batch to small batch.