



LEFT » Alesong Brewing & Blending's location on a farm 20 miles from Eugene, Oregon necessitated a specialized taproom strategy that focused first on weekends and expanded to accommodate summer tourism traffic.

NICHE MARKET

SPECIALIZED SUCCESS

To stand out from the crowd, sour-specific breweries stay creative, are frugal, and use unique sales tactics to keep their fans coming back for more. **BY JESSE BUSSARD**

LET'S FACE IT. WITH MORE than 6,700 breweries currently operating in the United States, it's hard to stand out from the crowd. Despite this massive sea of craft brewers, some are deciding to take the path less traveled and specialize in a particular style or family of beers.

Those finding success on this path include breweries fixated on wild, spontaneously fermented, and Belgian-inspired barrel-aged beers. Three standouts among the crowd in this arena include Madison, Wisconsin's Funk Factory Geuzeria, Speciation Artisan Ales of Comstock Park, Michigan, and Alesong Brewing & Blending of Eugene, Oregon.

Each of these sour-specific breweries has strategically left the brewhouse out of the picture, outsourcing their wort production to other local breweries. They

keep sales direct as much as possible, use unique sales tactics, and have been patient enough to wait until the timing was right to open a tasting room.

DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Specializing in wild and spontaneous beers can be challenging. They take longer to ferment than traditional "clean" beers, which are easily turned around in a month or less. Focused specifically on lambic-inspired beers produced in the "Méthode Traditionnelle" style, Funk Factory Geuzeria's beers can take up to three years to be ready to sell. During the first five years of the brewery's existence, Owner and Founder Levi Funk says beer releases were sporadic.

"We'd have a release and then not have another for six to nine months, maybe a year," he says.

Funk notes that it was difficult at the start to stay focused and not be tempted to brew a blonde, kettle sour, or IPA to fill in the gaps and make money. Despite the temptation, he stuck with it and maintained the discipline to get through those early years. Having a full-time job on the side helped.

Despite the uncertainty, Mitch Ermatinger of Speciation Artisan Ales says there are some silver linings, such as the fact his chosen beer specialty allows him to know his customers well. Plus, things are simpler to manage when you focus on only one or two types of products.

Funk agrees specialization brings benefits. "I think we do sours better than other people who just play around with a few barrels on the side," says Funk. "We know how to coax the wild yeasts and bacteria to create products that other brewers aren't able to."

KEEPING OVERHEAD LOW

Starting their brewery in early 2017, Ermatinger was conservative putting together his business plan for Speciation. Like the fermentation period of a wild ale, whether his hometown locals would like his beer was uncertain, and he was even unsure what price he would be able to ask for his beer. To mitigate risk and keep the business afloat, he decided to start Speciation small and not take on debt.

"That allowed us to produce a small amount of beer and still be profitable from month one," says Ermatinger.

Similarly, Funk was able to keep overhead costs low by initially incubating Funk Factory's barrel projects at nearby O'so Brewing Company in Plover, Wisconsin, for the first few years. Once he'd built up a large enough barrel stock and income, Funk moved into his own facility in Madison in early 2015.

"I don't know how a person would start something like this nowadays," says Funk. "It'd be extremely difficult if you tried without a collaborative brewery."

PHOTO: COURTESY ALESONG BREWING & BLENDING

SELLING DIRECT

Along with keeping overhead costs down, Doug Coombs of Alesong Brewing & Blending in Eugene, Oregon, says retaining a majority of beer sales in-house as much as possible is vital to his brewery's financial well-being.

"It's where we can really tell the story best and control the experience," says Coombs. "We have purposely chosen to focus on direct channels because you don't have retailers or distributors taking a margin off of it. The profitability is quite good."

Ermatinger agrees, pointing out that direct sales have been essential to Speciation's success. He estimates that about 85 percent of their beer sales are direct to customer.

"As soon as you go through a distributor, you're cutting out 30 percent of your profit margin or more," says Ermatinger. "If we had done that, we wouldn't have been able to pay our bills. For us, selling direct—more specifically, to-go—was the key."

Funk Factory, Speciation, and Alesong all incorporate a variation of a bottle club into their direct-sales strategy. They each maintain email lists of devoted patrons who are the first to know of special bottle releases. However, unlike in typical bottle releases, bottles are reserved in advance through an online ticketing service such as Eventbrite or a similar platform. Depending on the brewery, tickets may be free or prepaid in advance. Typically, each brewery releases three to six beers in each release, with limits on how many bottles of each beer a person can buy. Bottle buyers then pick up their beers on a set release date at the brewery's facility or tasting room.

Ermatinger, in particular, says he was in-



spired to employ this bottle sales method after seeing Casey Brewing and Blending of Glenwood Springs, Colorado, find success with it.

"It was important to us to have bottle-release days go smoothly. That's why we do the ticketed-release method," says Ermatinger. "It makes everything so smooth. The longest you wait in line is like five minutes. People feel relaxed, they don't feel pressure or anything like that, and no one is waiting in line for hours."

Likewise, Funk says ticketed releases help to keep the chaos of a bottle release online.

"In my view, it's a more equitable opportunity for people," says Funk. "On the day of the release, people aren't driving for hours only to get there and not get a bottle."

Taking the bottle-club concept one step further, Alesong has recently broken

into the realm of shipping beers to select states in a new partnership with Tavour, the mobile-based mail-order beer service. They also have been experimenting with remote pickup parties in their neighboring cities of Seattle and Portland.

DELAYING THE TAPROOM

Together with adding a more regular income stream, the eventual addition of a tasting room to each of these breweries has only further contributed to their staying power. Each waited until the timing was right before opening their taproom and maintains a cautious approach to hours of operation and pour sizes.

"We waited three years before we opened the taproom," says Funk.

For Funk Factory, specifically, the addition of a tasting room came largely only after Funk stumbled across the little-known meerts (pronounced mertz) style. It's historically brewed from the second runnings of a lambic, and Funk is able to brew this light, low alcohol (generally 3–4 percent) beer in foeders year-round and have it on tap in the relatively short time of just a few months. It also fits well in his lambic-inspired line-up of beers.

Alesong's tasting room was initially delayed because of construction issues. Because Alesong is located on a farm about twenty miles southwest of Eugene, when the taproom was ready to open, the brewery started with very limited hours.

FUNK FACTORY, SPECIATION, AND ALESONG ALL INCORPORATE A VARIATION OF A BOTTLE CLUB INTO THEIR DIRECT-SALES STRATEGY. BOTTLES ARE RESERVED IN ADVANCE THROUGH AN ONLINE TICKETING SERVICE SUCH AS EVENTBRITE. TYPICALLY, EACH BREWERY RELEASES THREE TO SIX BEERS IN EACH RELEASE, WITH LIMITS ON HOW MANY BOTTLES OF EACH BEER A PERSON CAN BUY. BOTTLE BUYERS THEN PICK UP THEIR BEERS ON A SET RELEASE DATE AT THE BREWERY'S FACILITY OR TASTING ROOM.