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SHANNON CORNMAN

Hopping to it

With new brewery, OKC trio taps into microbrewing trend

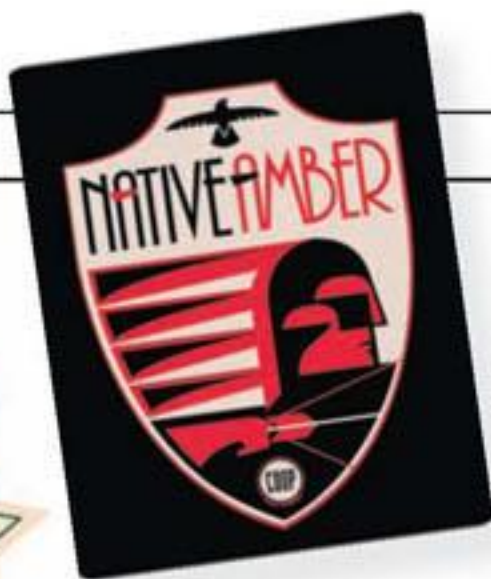
BY BILL KIZER

Who could have guessed that the idea for COOP Ale Works, Oklahoma City's newest microbrewery, would come together over – what else – a beer? But as Mark Seibold and J.D. Merryweather chatted over the beer tub at a business function one evening in 2005, they discovered both had a long-harbored desire to open a brewery.

The timing seemed right. A re-emergence of local microbreweries in the U.S. began in the '80s when beer drinkers began experimenting and found they could produce a brew with a quality and flavor that far exceeded anything offered by the major brewing houses.

has experienced phenomenal growth in the years since.

“We researched local, regional,



left J.D. Merryweather, COOP Ale general manager, with brewmaster Chase Healey below Kevin Sine will offer COOP Ale Works' brews at 51st Street Speakeasy, 1114 NW 51 St.

national and international microbrewing trends," says Merryweather, general manager, "and we realized that Oklahoma City is primed for some good beer. We are actually way behind the curve, nationally."

Adds Seibold, manager, "We learned that our assumptions were supported by the numbers, indicating to us that demand did exist."

While still a long way from posing a real competitive threat to the majors as far as total sales volume, small "quality-based" beers (versus large "quantity-based" beers) have been increasingly embraced by the U.S. beer-buying public.

"It (higher quality, fuller-tasting beer) is available, and they know it," says Merryweather. "People have been educated about it and, more and more, they are seeking it out."

After adding Daniel Mercer as a third partner, the trio set about turning its vision into reality with a visit to Denver's

thriving microbrewery community. There, they came away with more than just a solid practical insight into the process.

"It was a great opportunity for us to figure out what we could handle and how we should move into the market," Merryweather says. "It was also very inspirational for us to look at the different beer styles, then come back and hone our portfolio of beers."

But before visions become functioning breweries, a common hurdle must be overcome: the need for capital.

"We spent thousands of hours researching industry performance and standards, and we developed a plan and a financial model that rivals those developed by startup companies seeking millions in equity capital in the venture markets," says Mercer, the financial specialist behind COOP Ale Works.

How much capital is required to open a brewery? "A lot," he says.

Flying their COOP

The company name – COOP Ale Works – originated as a play on the word "co-op," describing the cooperative nature of the



COOP Ale Works' beer portfolio

Coop Ale Works will present five signature beers initially, but has plans for 14 different brews to be introduced over time, including seasonal and specialty beers.



Horny Toad – A premium "cervesa-style" lager brewed with Maris Otter malt for a touch of sweetness balanced perfectly with German Hallertau hops.



Native Amber – A medium-bodied amber with aromas of toasty grains, biscuit and caramel. Notes of citrus shine through from the late hop addition in the brewing process, making for a well-balanced beer.



Gran Sport Porter – A dark, "roasty" ale with ruby highlights. Coffee and chocolate notes are present in this robust porter.



Zeppelin German Wheat – A unique spin on the classic Hefeweizen (pronounced: hef-eh-vi-sun), Zeppelin Wheat is brewed with white wheat and rye malt for an added touch of spice. It is then finished with Cascade hops and left unfiltered, keeping all the good stuff inside.



DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) – An abbey-style ale with big flavor. Caramel, toffee and dry fruit tones are present. At 10.5% alcohol by volume, this is one serious ale.





Brewmaster Chase Healey and J.D. Merryweather, general manager, at COOP Ale Works brewery on NW 51st Street.

project. But Merryweather, the company's head of creative, explains that the name also hints at "coopersmith" and reflects back to the company symbol – an anvil – and theme of "hand-forged."

"We are emphasizing the quality and the flavor of our beer," he says. "And there is a real pride that goes into making a product like this. We feel we have 'hand-forged' it. That industrial feeling and aesthetic is carried through in the company's label and packaging designs."

The company has completed the construction and permitting process for its NW 51 Street and Classen Boulevard plant, with plans to commence brewing operations in mid-January.

"Initially, our focus will be on Oklahoma City and parts of Tulsa," Merryweather says. "We are going to come out of the gate with keg beer, and will be in many of the fine drinking establishments and restaurants in town."

Plans are already in place to add a bottling line to the operation that will make COOP products available to package stores and restaurants that don't have tap facilities. As for longer-term growth plans, COOP plans to expand from its current seven-barrel (217 gallon) system to a 30-barrel system within five years.

"Our plans are to expand statewide, and, if we are well-received, add parts of Texas and New Mexico," Mer-

ryweather says. "We will let it pick up momentum and see where it goes."

With only one other microbrewery in Oklahoma City and only four others statewide, as far as the overall competitive picture, COOP Ale Works finds itself in a very comfortable position.

"This could be a risky business if we were competing against 20 or 30 other breweries for the same market, but we are not, really, because we're all offering very different beer styles," Merryweather says. "Some may overlap, but, for the most part, we are all bringing a distinctly different product to the market."

The growing popularity of microbreweries comes, in part, from a desire by many people to break away from the uniformity of America's "national" culture. In that way, the "local-ness" and unique nature of COOP Ale Works becomes a real marketing advantage – one on which Mercer says his company intends to capitalize.

"We will be the beer that represents Oklahoma City," he says, "just as Anchor represents San Francisco and Boston Beer Company (Samuel Adams) represents Boston." **BIZ**

COOP ALE WORKS PARTNERS:

When they are not behind the brew kettle



J.D. Merryweather
 Ohio native and Oklahoma City resident for almost 15 years, Merryweather has operated a commercial photography business for the past 25 years and, more recently, opened an advertising firm: Merryweather Creative. As head of creative and outside sales, he brings years of creative experience to the COOP Ale Works team.



Mark Seibold
 A Choctaw native, Seibold is a licensed architect with a broad professional background on a wide range of architectural projects large and small. He now serves as city planning director for the city of Choctaw.



Daniel Mercer
 A Yukon native and Oklahoma City University graduate, Mercer is an Air Force student pilot currently training at Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training at Sheppard Air Force Base. Mercer has worked in community development, venture capital and consulting, specializing in technology development and investments in startup and expansion stage companies.