

FROM LEFT: MIKE BROOKS, JON LAURENCIC AND ALEX NICHOLS OF ELORA BREWING COMPANY AND DEAN WORKMAN OF CANAUSSIE FARMS

Hops, brews give Centre Wellington businesses provincial recognition

JAIME MYSLIK - ELORA

From hops to brews, Centre Wellington is on the map for producing great beer.

The Elora Brewing Company and CanAussie Farms Inc. recently won second place in the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food's (OMAFRA) Great Ontario-Hopped Craft Beer Competition.

The plaque presentation was made in June.

"It was tight, they were actually really close to first but we try to remain as technical and transparent as possible," said Jason Deveau, one of three OMAFRA competition organizers.

"It's a little like judging a diving competition; it seems a little subjective, but really we're very critical and we give our judge's review back to the growers and the brewers so that they can learn what professional judges think of the quality of their submission."

The competition began seven years go.

"We wanted to encourage Ontario's brewers to experiment with Ontario hops in the hopes that maybe the two of them grow together," Deveau said.

"And we couldn't think of a good way to do that until we came up with the idea of a competition.

"Why don't we create a venue where the brewer has to work with only Ontario hops?"

And so the Great Ontario-Hopped Craft Beer Competition was born. The competition involves Ontario brewers and hop growers teaming up to brew a specific beer selected by the public.

Last year the 16 participating breweries created a black IPA. The competition can handle up to 18 brewers, but due to unforeseen circumstances, all entrants don't always produce a beer for the competition.

For the Elora Brewing Company, working with Dean Workman and CanAussie Farms Inc. was the right fit. After all, the hop farm, on Beatty Line just outside Fergus, isn't far from the brewery.

Brewer Mike Brooks made a small one-off batch of black IPA for the competition and Workman supplied cascade hops.

"Cascade hops are really good for black IPAs in my opinion; it kind of complements the little bit of roasty, smokiness that you get from the beers and gives it ... the floral punch that you ... get," said Elora Brewing Company co-owner Jon Laurencic.

Workman said the black IPA is difficult to brew.

"It's really difficult to not go overboard with the dark roast," he said. "You've got to be really careful about how you blend those two, otherwise the darkness of the grain can overpower it and can diminish the flavour of the hops.

"So it's a real balancing act to get it to taste nice."

PHOTOS: JAIME MYSLIK

The competition isn't the first time the Elora Brewing Company and CanAussie have worked together.



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JASON DEVEAU, OMAFRA COMPETITION ORGANIZER

Laurencic said the professional relationship began before the brewing company was even a thought. Workman knew a few of the brewery partners when he started his hop farm in 2012. The brewery didn't open until September 2015.

"[He] would have started coming into being able to harvest about the same time we opened," Laurencic said.

Now the brewery and CanAussie have a fluid and functional relationship, with brewers calling Workman and asking for specific hops.

"In the harvest time, we do a fresh wet hop farmer's beer," Workman said. "So we'll talk about it a couple days before, I'll let the guys know that it's coming up to harvest time, they'll start the mash and I'll get the boys working.

"We'll harvest them and bring them in fresh right from the field, through the picker and that is a great beer."

This is exactly the type of relationship OMAFRA officials hoped to form as a result of the competition.

"Now in our seventh year, we're really proud to be able to say some of the beer that won our competition is now commercially available and the relationship between the brewers and the hop growers has continued, which is our real reason for being," Deveau said.

"The hops industry has evolved by leaps and bounds.

"The growers are able to sell them almost on consignment - 'these are the hops we're looking for, this is the quality of hops we want and this is when we need them' - and the growers can support them in that."

Next year's competition will ask brewers and hop growers to develop a New England IPA (NEIPA).

"It's a new style; it's only recently been defined even though the beer's been around for a while and it's considered a juicy, fruity, fragrant hop-forward IPA with very little bitterness in the background," Deveau said.

Laurencic and Workman both said the Elora Brewing Company and CanAussie would like to participate together again if the competition allows for it.

"It's really nice to have an organization that's really pushing for breweries and local growers to pair up and it's definitely nice to have the spotlight shone on that relationship," Laurencic said.

"Kudos to them for getting this going and reaching out to us in the first place and asking us to participate.

"It's a lot of fun and it's nice to have a little bit of competition every once in a while. But at the end of the day, it's just about working with people that are your neighbours and within your community to make beer."

For more information about the Great Ontario-Hopped Craft Beer Competition, visit www.onhops.ca.

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