

SUMMER SPIRIT(S)

BY JAIME MYSLIK

MATT LAWSON, ELORA BREWING COMPANY

WELLINGTON COUNTY - A cool drink on a hot summer day is, for many, a quintessential Canadian experience.

Luckily, in Wellington County, there's no shortage of local brews and spirits.

Craft breweries and distilleries have been popping up over the last few years throughout the province. Ontario Craft Brewers has more than 180 operating members and the Ontario Craft Distillers Association has 16 active members.

More recently, spirit enthusiasts have been seeking out these breweries and distilleries as a destination, making the tourist experience important to the overall success of the business.

ELORA BREWING COMPANY

One of Wellington County's craft breweries is the Elora Brewing Company, which opened in the fall of 2015. Located on Geddes Street in Elora, the owners knew prior to opening that they would focus on bringing some of the town's tourist traffic into the brewery. The downtown location was strategic.

"Elora is in itself a town that already draws a lot of people," said co-owner Matt Lawson. "I know that when we were first going through our business proposal to open this place we looked at the numbers and they were pretty staggering."

Lawson said he uses social media to promote the brewery in conjunction with the town. He explained that he sometimes takes Elora Brewing Company beer out to a local landmark like Lover's Leap, creates a video and posts it to social media.



"Expose the intricacies of the town to draw people as well because people could come here for recreation, they could come here for camping, they come here to go fishing, or boating, or whatever and then also say 'Hey let's go there and then we'll stop at the brewery for lunch,'" he said.

"So using that and using sort of the power of the natural landscape and the draw of the heritage in the communities is really important."

However, Lawson said there has been a shift: now the brewery also draws people to the town, rather than the town bringing people to the brewery.

Lawson said knowing the brewery is generating tourism traffic of its own - he estimates 50% of business is tourism related - has led the brewery to release a specialty beer that is only available at the brewery itself.

"When people know that they have something here that they haven't tried, maybe they're from Cambridge, or they're from Waterloo or Guelph or Toronto," he said. "It will make it worth the drive for them if they know we have an upper-end beer ... that they've never tried that they can take home with them or come to the bar and try as well."

Wild Saison with Brett Blend, for example, is artisanal in nature using wild yeasts and some other interesting ingredients, Lawson said.

One of the recent tourism trends is craft brewery and distillery tours, for which tourists plan visit a few different establishments in one day. Because there are a number of breweries in the area, Lawson said the Elora Brewing Company benefits with these self-guided tours.

He said the brewery is also part of a tour

PHOTOS: JAIME MYSLIK

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KEVIN (CHEVY) PATTERSON, VICKY DIXON, MEGHAN HENRY AND JEREMIE DIXON, DIXON'S DISTILLED SPIRITS, GUELPH



company called Brew Donkey, which allows spirit enthusiasts to hop on a bus and visit a selection of breweries for a flat fee.

On those tours the Elora Brewing Company offers a tour and tasting.

"It's a really inexpensive way to expose people to what you have to offer and a lot of times we've had people come in here and the space is very appealing and say, 'Oh I'm definitely coming back,'" Lawson said.

He added the brewery also offers tours by special request when guests call ahead.

"We don't have tours running on the hour like some breweries do but we do have a lounge upstairs that we staff on Saturdays and people up there are very happy to talk about the brewery and the whole process and all that kind of stuff," he said. "And if you just wanted to come in you can ... take a look at the mezzanine upstairs and take a look down at everything that's happening down there.

"It's very self-explanatory."

DIXON'S DISTILLED SPIRITS

While craft breweries have boomed in recent years, there are still a limited number of craft distillers in Ontario. One of them is located in Guelph.

Centre Wellington natives Kevin (Chevy) Patterson, Jeremie Dixon and Vicky Dixon opened Dixon's Distilled Spirits almost two years ago and they say tourism is a big part of their business.

"On the weekends in here we (offer) tours all the time so we're on Groupon, Wag Jag, and just even people emailing into the distillery," Patterson said.

> **"We looked at the (tourism) numbers and they were pretty staggering ..."**
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> MATT LAWSON, PART OWNER - ELORA BREWING COMPANY

Last year the distillery offered tours regularly during the week; however, they became so popular Dixon's had to limit tours to the weekend so they wouldn't disturb the production process.

"Most weekends are a zoo," Patterson said. "It's crazy. Which is good right and it's non-stop tours. We run tours on the hour right from 1 to 6 o'clock on Saturday and then right from noon to 4 on Sundays."

However, much of the tourism adjustments have been adapted on the job.

"We knew going in ... that it had to be a part of it," Patterson said. "Looking back on it now I don't think we realized how big it has become."

The distillery is also part of the Brew Donkey tour.

Patterson said most people who come in for a tour leave with a purchase.

And many also return. Vicky said they have a couple of regular customers from Ottawa who stop in whenever they're in Guelph for Dixon's products.

Another source of tourism dollars for the distillery is festivals and food and wine shows.

"I was working the store the day of the [Waterloo Region Food and Drink Show] and I had people coming in from the wine show over here. They said, 'Oh I just tried your gin or your gin fusion at the wine show, I want to buy some.'"

And this isn't isolated. The owners say they get people from various festivals coming to Guelph to buy their product after sampling the distillery's spirits.

Patterson said he thinks it's the uniqueness of the business that draws people in.

"I always ask people, when I'm doing a tour here, 'Have you ever seen a brewery or a winery?' And about 99% of the people put their hands up ... I ask 'have you seen a distillery?'" he said. "It's pretty rare that anyone puts their hand up so it's a very unique business for sure."

ADDITIONAL BREWERIES

There are a number of craft breweries throughout Guelph and Wellington County, including:

- Four Father Brewing Co. in Rockwood;
- Wellington Brewery in Guelph;
- StoneHammer Brewing in Guelph;
- Royal City Brewing Co. in Guelph; and
- Brothers Brewing Co. in Guelph.

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