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Beer Baron: New Directions Abound for Milwaukee Brewing

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As a business, it's always nice to be growing.

And these days, small brewers are almost always growing.

Case in point this week is Milwaukee Brewing, which recently announced that it had added a series of fermentation tanks and other equipment to raise its annual capacity to 15,000 barrels. That's up about 25 percent from the 12,000-barrel ceiling it created after a 2012 expansion.

Milwaukee Brewing produced about 8,000 barrels last year and also handled contract brewing for clients including Stillmank Brewing of Green Bay and Spring Green-based Furthermore Beer.



Based on those numbers, you'd think there'd be ample time for Milwaukee Brewing to grow into its new tanks. But the company said it also logged a sales increase of a whopping 60 percent in the first quarter of the year, thanks in part to a new market — it shipped its first beer to Minnesota in March — and a steady flow of new beers.

February saw the introduction of two new India pale ales (in case you need reminding, the most popular style in craft beer). Spring seasonal Litta Bitta is a white IPA, a style that can mean a lot of things but in this case refers to a Belgian-style wit pumped up with American hops and lemongrass. Also new this spring was Hop Freak, a double IPA brewed with jasmine tea. Come July or August will be another new seasonal, a gooseberry Berliner weisse called Increase Wheat.

That trickle of new beers will become a flood as 2014 progresses, with the introduction of the Destination Local Series, made up of Milwaukee Brewing's first release of 750-milliliter single bottles.

Milwaukee Brewing sales director Mike Christensen said the first four of these big, adventurous beers, packaged with an air travel theme, will hit shelves within a couple of weeks: Doppelvision, a bourbon barrel-aged doppelbock; Dark Matter imperial schwarzbier; Anti Matter, a barrel-aged version of Dark Matter; and Recombobulation, an imperial black IPA.

Planned for later this year are a Belgian trippel (August); a version of Louie's Resurrection amber ale aged in bourbon barrels for a year, 10 months longer than the annual release (October); a Russian imperial stout (November); Elf's Lament, a Christmas beer; and Louie's Cherry

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Bounce, a variant of Louie's Resurrection aged for an extra month with Door County tart cherries (December).

While there's plenty to like in the present and future of this brewery, Milwaukee Brewing is firmly grounded in the past. When it opened its production brewery in 2007, it had actually been making beer for 10 years before that at the Milwaukee Ale House, the fantastic Third Ward brewpub.

Its beers draw on the zany characters and stories of Milwaukee's past that make up its "local flavor," from the mid-19th century "Bridge War" feud that divided the incipient city into two settlements, to the massive Allen-Bradley clock known as the "Polish Moon" lighting the sky above a largely Polish neighborhood.

So it makes sense that the newest addition to Milwaukee Brewing's year-round lineup is a throwback American style that evokes a lot of the beer made in the city decades ago and whose name is a tribute to one of the big names from its industrial heyday.

Outboard

Style: Cream ale

Brewed by: Milwaukee Brewing at its production brewery in the Walker's Point area.

What it's like: This style — no less than the gurus of beer descriptions refer to it as a lawnmower beer — has a rich tradition and prominent place in American brewing history, mostly in the period before Prohibition. While it has lost some of its luster in recent years — the top two beers in the category at this year's World Beer Cup were Old Style and Icehouse — craft versions are often regarded as throwbacks to the style's formative, more robust years. These days, perhaps the world's most prominent cream ale — albeit a more rustic farmhouse variant — is New Glarus' Spotted Cow. Lake Louie also has one among its regular offerings, in Coon Rock, which has been renamed Golden Booty.

Where, how much: My six pack of bottles — sadly, not the retro cans — was \$8 at Woodman's East.

The beer: If you ask a 60-year-old what beer looks like, they'll describe Outboard: pale gold, moderately fizzy and a little white head. The aroma is muted, with a floral hop aroma poking gently through a grainy sweetness. A swig — sips need not apply — follows accordingly, with the corn included in the malt bill noticeable but tied off nicely by a crisp finish. I've used this phrase before, in a review of Point Special three years ago, but it begs to be included here: This is beer, unadorned.

Booze factor: Outboard's 5 percent ABV matches that of a Budweiser or a New Glarus Moon Man, depending on what your reference point is.

The buzz: The name of Outboard is a reference to Ole Evinrude, a Norwegian immigrant who settled near Cambridge as a boy and went on to develop the first commercially successful

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outboard motor. His namesake company, based in Milwaukee, employed hundreds at its peak in the mid-20th century. Evinrude outboards are still produced in Wisconsin, now a few miles south in Sturtevant.

Speaking of outboards, there's been a lot of buzz out of Milwaukee this spring about the Miller Lite retro can, which calls back to its original 1975 package. For my money, I'll take the throwback Outboard tallboy can, which looks like it should have a pull-off tab instead of a "punch top," any sultry summer day.

Bottom line: 3½ stars (out of five)