

Trio brews new beer business

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Author: Joe Mosley The Register-Guard

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Jamie Floyd and two partners are starting city's first production brewery

Jamie Floyd spent 8 1/2 years in someone else's brewery doing what he loves to do - creating beer.

Now he's preparing to mix what he loves to do with what he's always wanted to do.

Floyd and two partners are getting ready to open Eugene's first production brewery and create beer under their own label. Their business will sell its products primarily to other restaurants and taverns, while the area's existing brew pubs sell most of their beer in-house.

"I've always been an entrepreneurial sort," Floyd said Tuesday. "It's absolutely what I wanted to do all along. And I've been in the business long enough to know I can do it."

Floyd and his partners, Thomas Kamis and Nikos Ridge, hope to be selling kegs by the end of June to the 30 wholesale accounts they've already established. They will set up shop for now in leased brewery space at Sofia's Restaurant in Springfield's Gateway area, but hope to be operating from their own space in Eugene's Whiteaker Neighborhood by this fall.

Their partnership - Ninkasi Brewing Co. - is working to finalize its purchase of the Vos Plumbing building at 272 Van Buren St., and will equip it this summer for long-term brewing operations.

"We are going to be a production brewery, and are going to open a tasting room," Floyd said. "There will be food and a cafe-type experience there, but it's not going to be like a regular restaurant."

Brian Butenschoen, executive director of the Oregon Brewers Guild, said the unique focus of Floyd's venture may allow it to succeed where other local brewing operations have failed in recent years. At least three Eugene brew pubs - West Bros. BBQ, the Wild Duck Brewery and Fields brew pub - went out of business after opening during the brew pub heyday of the 1990s.

"I think there's a good market for it," Butenschoen said. "I think he's going to be able to basically start out making the money he needs to keep his business up and running, and it sounds like he's not going to be under-capitalized."

Floyd said he has loans and investment capital that make his business worth about \$500,000 before the first keg is brewed.

"The Eugene market should be able to support him, because there's not anybody else doing what he's doing," Butenschoen said. "I think he's been down there and has seen enough that he can avoid all the pitfalls of the people that have gone before him."

Despite the hit-and-miss track record of Eugene area brew pubs, the production of microbrews in Oregon is a growth industry. According to the Brewers Guild, the state's craft brewers produced the equivalent of more than 226 million bottles of beer in 2005 - a 16 percent increase over 2004.

Ninkasi - named for the ancient Sumerian goddess of brewing - will be trying to make a name for itself among the state's established brands, Floyd said.

"When you work for other people, there's a lot of potential that I think isn't met," he said. "I really want Eugene to have a brewery of its own ... that is recognizable, like Lagunitas is with San Diego, and Full Sail with Hood River."

Floyd worked at Eugene's Steelhead Brewery for 11 years, including 8 1/2 years in beer production, before leaving Feb. 1 to start his own business. He has created several of his own recipes and hopes to find a niche by producing a broad spectrum of beers.

"I plan to brew lots of lagers, not just ales," Floyd said. "Lagering takes a long time, and most breweries do not design themselves in a way to accommodate that. It's why the Northwest hasn't brewed a lot of lagers. It requires a lot of patience."

Lagers are brewed with slower-reacting yeast strains than ales, and typically require cool temperatures for their long fermentation periods.

"We're going to build that aspect directly into the brewery, and it will allow us to have a more distinctive identity than people are used to," Floyd said.

Floyd intends to operate the brewery initially with his two partners and the occasional help of a pair of investors. Additional employees probably will be added when the new brewery's tasting room opens in the fall, he said.

Kamis has been in the food service business for more than 14 years, most recently at Cafe Soriah, and will be the partnership's restaurant expert, while Ridge - a 25-year-old who has spent the past 10 summers on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange - will serve as chief financial officer. Ridge has a degree in economics from New York University.

Ninkasi beers will be sold by wholesale restaurant and tavern clients, including Sam Bonds Garage, Highlands, Wetlands, Good Times, the Villard Street Pub, McDonald Theater, Red Agave, Vaquero, Sweet Basil, Cornucopia, Cafe Zenon and the Bier Stein. The beers also will be available at Sofia's.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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