

## Freewheel Brewery: From Cask to Glass

By Emily Mangini



Freewheel brewmasters Alisha Blue and Malcom McGinnis

British-style brewpub Freewheel wants you to come and drink, for hours. That's a 'session,' hours and hours of drinking, preferably drinking 'session' ales. Not to worry about inebriation. Full of flavor but lower in alcohol, these brews allow thoughts to stay clear and conversations unfuzzy. At a time when 10 percent ABV double IPAs are all the rage and practically are served with a designated driver, Freewheel is charting its own course with 5 percent content, making it a standout in the craft beer industry.

The brainchild of four biotech guys, Malcom McGinnis, Pete Krausa, Larry Bucka and Gary Waymire, Freewheel opened in Marsh Manor in 2013; however, its genesis dates to the late '80s and McGinnis' home brewing hobby. It wasn't until 20 years later, when he and Krausa sold their biotech company, that he got serious about opening a brewery. With the help and enthusiasm of Larry, Garry, and British-born Pete, Freewheel took shape.

When it came time to start brewing, the biotech-turned-brewing foursome noticed a trend in California craft beer: big and bold, with a real kick in the stout. Free-



wheel's founders wanted to do something different. Though British session ales are often, and unfairly, branded as "warm and flat", it was an open niche in the market. Furthermore, the session ale fit perfectly into the plan to create a sociable, community-friendly pub.

How did three Yanks and a Brit establish a British-style brewpub this side of the pond? Good, old-fashioned online research. And an epic road trip. Having researched England's award-winning breweries, McGinnis and Krausa motored through the country, visiting a curated list of pubs and picking the brains of brewmasters. In the process they established

relationships with brewers who continue to serve as mentors and guides.

Some Freewheel beers are the direct result of those collaborations. The sweet and smoky **Ironbridge Wenlock Stout**, or the malty **Bank Top Dark Mild** will whisk you back to Shopshire and Bolton. Freewheel also creates original recipes, such as **Mind the Gap IPA**, a crowd favorite, or the **Freewheel Pale Ale**. The latter took home the silver medal at the California State Fair's craft brew competition in 2013. It displays nicely with the gold medal awarded to the bitter ale, **London Calling**.

McGinnis admits that the "warm and flat" stereotype is not to be underestimated, and something they never tire of explaining away. Alisha Blue, who studied and honed her brewing craft in Chicago, Germany and England, brews alongside McGinnis at Freewheel. She deftly explains what makes British beers different. "English ales tend to be more nuanced and subtle in flavor. They have a lot of it, but if you served them fizzy and really cold, all of those nuances would be ruined. So the flavors develop in tandem with the serving method," she said.

As she explained it, "warm and flat" is an uneducated characterization that does not recognize an old brewing tradition that brings out beer's subtle charms. One difference is making beer in casks instead of kegs. Unlike keg-brewed beers, cask ales do not have added carbonation. Live yeast in the beer, instead of a tank of CO<sub>2</sub>, provides a natural fizz. The result is a more delicate carbonation than typical in American beers, but it's certainly not flat. Natural carbonation makes drinking session ales best when they are pulled fresh from the cask — similar to "farm to table" food, only in this case it's "cask to glass."

The casks themselves decidedly are low tech. Rather than repose in big refrigerators, these casks dwell in cellars.

Tackling the "warm" issue, McGinnis explains: "Our brews are served at cellar temperature, which is around 50 degrees Fahrenheit. That's warmer than American beers, but also like swimming in the bay — definitely not warm."

The consequence, he adds, is that without an excess of chill and carbonation there is "nowhere to hide." Every decision the brewer makes is on display — what he or she intended, from ingredients to handling, is what you get.

With ten brews available it can be hard to know where to start. The best way to experience Freewheel is with the tasting flight. A hearty sample of six of Freewheel's brews, this is the surest way to learn about session ales and find a favorite, or two.

Ask questions. Brewers and bartenders are on hand, well informed, and eager to answer.

"A lot of what we do is educate folks on why our beers are different. People come in expecting something totally different, and it's an opportunity for us to tell them about our beers," Blue said.

The beauty of "session" style drinking is that there is room to enjoy a number of pints. Perhaps start with the **Freewheel**

**Special Bitter**, with its hint of caramel hops, then move to the **Big V Amber**, a full-bodied beer named for the burly British welder who built Freewheel's brewery. The choice is yours, but if you need a guide the staff at Freewheel is more than willing.

Freewheel has become a hub where families can gather and strangers can become friends. "One of our regulars told me that she has met more of her neighbors here than she has living on the same street for the past 18 years. I love that," said McGinnis.

Though you may be in for a session, be ready to get pulled onto a trivia team, or hop up to the karaoke mike and belt out a few tunes. Taste, explore, enjoy the nuanced flavors that session ales bring to the palate. Do as you wish, but never call the ale warm. **C**

### So how did three Yanks and a Brit with backgrounds in biotech establish a British-style brewpub this side of the pond?



Below: McGinnis and Blue get the brew started by mixing the grain with hot water, also known as mashing in.



Right: Blue takes the chill off the mash tun in preparation for mashing in.



Top: McGinnis's son, Duncan, who has been an assistant brewer, watches his dad work. He is off to Providence College next Fall. Imagine the look on his roommates' faces when he tells them what his father does for a living!

Left: A successful day of brewing must start with the right music. So McGinnis cues up something appropriate: The Grateful Dead.



Below: Freewheel not only serves great brew but some pretty impressive food. Chef Benny keeps a tasty menu going.

