



Raising *the* Bar

By RHEA R. BORJA
Photos by MARC CAMPOS



OPPOSITE: "I love most things about beer," Odell says. **LEFT:** The recently expanded Odell Brewing Co. sits a half-mile from its original location in a converted grain elevator, circa 1915. **BELOW:** The award-winning 90 Shilling Ale and India Pale Ale are two of Odell's "classic" creations.



Colorado-based microbrewer Doug Odell '75 taps into green technology to craft a better beverage

DOUg ODELL '75 MAY well be the Willy Wonka of beer. Inside the walls of a set of modern wheat and burnt orange buildings rising up from the windblown plain in Fort Collins, Colo., he unassumingly indulges his enduring passion for hand-crafted brews, experimenting and innovating with various ingredients and methods. Recent concoctions include Frik, a Belgian-style ale made with 3,500 pounds of cherries and hand-picked local raspberries; and Avant Peche, a traditional porter made with locally grown peaches and wild yeasts—limited-edition beers bottled and corked in caged 750-milliliter Champagne bottles.

That's pretty imaginative stuff for a guy who brewed his first batch of beer out of a friend's Eagle Rock bachelor pad in 1976, when such activity was still a federal offense. (The law changed in 1979.) Like other home brewers, Odell craved the full body and more complex taste of ales and lagers traditional to English, Belgian, and German breweries—a style of beer that was made in the United States before Prohibition. "When I home-brewed beer and brought it to parties, people loved it," he says. "So I kept making it."

Since 1989, Odell has realized his passion in the products of Odell Brewing Co., which has mushroomed from a three-person operation brewing beer with used dairy

equipment to a 64-person, environmentally and socially responsible company selling 16 beers in 10 states and the United Kingdom.

Odell beers such as the 5 Barrel Pale Ale, Cutthroat Porter, and the Scottish-style 90 Shilling Ale—the company's flagship brand—have won a slew of awards at beer festivals and accolades from beer geeks the world over ("The only problem was that it was so good I wanted to pour it on my cornflakes at breakfast," one English beer blogger wrote of 90 Shilling Ale). Odell himself judges beer at international competitions when he's not overseeing the company and contemplating the next new offering.

"We're selling on quality, innovation, and green practices," Odell says. "We're not about lower price. People see more value in a \$9 six-pack of craft brew than a \$6 six-pack of other beer."

By definition, craft breweries are small, independent, and traditional. According to the Brewers Association, an organization of independent American beer makers, they must be at least 75 percent locally owned, offer either an all-malt flagship beer or make 50 percent or more of their volume in all-malt beer, and produce fewer than 6 million barrels a year. When Odell Brewing opened, it was the fifth craft brewery in Colorado. Now 124 such enterprises are based in the Centennial State, which ranks fifth in the

country in craft breweries per capita. Nationwide, 1,600 craft breweries dot the landscape, and Odell ranks among the top 50 craft breweries by volume in the United States and No. 2 in Colorado.

While craft beer accounts for only 5 percent of the U.S. market, sales nationwide increased 12 percent in the first half of 2010—bucking a 2.7 percent decline in overall beer sales, according to data from the Brewers Association. Even though it costs more than the mass-produced light lagers made by Anheuser-Busch and Molson Coors, craft brew appeals to Americans' increasingly sophisticated palates with a variety of adventurous, full-flavored beers produced by Odell Brewing and its peers.

For instance, Odell's Bourbon Stout ages four months in barrels that once contained Kentucky Bourbon, while its Woodcut series showcases premium beer aged in hand-coopered virgin oak barrels. (A writer for the food and drinks site *Slashfood.com* raves: "If you find an extra bottle of Odell's Woodcut No. 4 floating around, snap it up. The results are transcendent: toffee, vanilla, earthy hops, and malty opulence.")

The company also makes a number of seasonal beers—the award-winning Red Ale in spring, the hoppy St. Lupulin extra pale ale in summer, and the malty Isolation Ale in winter. Odell's personal favorite? "I really



1



2

1. Inside the brew kettles lies the wort—a sugar-water mixture that is produced after milled grains and hot water are combined. 2. Odell looks in a brew kettle. The wort will be boiled and combined with fragrant hops, which add a slightly bitter taste. 3. Brewer Brent Cordle rinses out an oak barrel, which will be refilled with beer for aging.



4



5



3



6

4. Packaging technician Johnny Benson keeps an eye on the final stage of production as six-packs are boxed for shipping. 5. Bottles of India Pale Ale move speedily through the labeling machines. 6. Half barrels full of beer are stored in a giant cooler, ready for distribution. 7. Patrons pack Odell Brewery's Tap Room on a late Wednesday afternoon. Live music and a friendly atmosphere make for a must-see stop for people touring some of Colorado's 124 craft breweries, nine of which are in Fort Collins. 8. A sign advertising Odell's 5 Barrel Pale Ale overlooks downtown.



7



8

don't have one," he admits. "It all depends on the time of day and what I'm eating with it. I just see what catches my eye."

While Odell lives in a town that's home to sprawling Colorado State University, Oxy blood runs through his veins. His grandfather, Morgan Odell Sr. '17, was Occidental's chaplain and chairman of the philosophy and religion department from 1931 to 1942 before presiding over Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Ore. His parents, the late Morgan Odell Jr. '42 and Betty (Fletcher) Odell '42, met and wed at the College. And Doug and his older sister, Corkie, grew up a stone's throw from campus, on Ridgeview Road.

"As a kid, Doug was weird," says Corkie, now Odell Brewing's human resources director. "He and a friend would go dumpster diving and come back with all sorts of stuff. Then he would take those things apart to see how they worked."

Odell transferred to Occidental after a year and a half at Menlo College and majored in geology before switching to psychology. Aside from academics, a demanding track regiment and a busy social life ate up his free time. (At 58, Odell still has the rangy build and lithe energy of the track star he was at Oxy—two-time NAIA champ in the 440 hurdles and member of the 1600-meter relay team that still holds the school record of 3:07.6.) He eventually returned to geology, completing a second bachelor's degree at Sonoma State University in 1980.

Not one for a desk job, Odell worked 18-hour shifts as a firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service and cleaned the equipment at San Francisco's Anchor Brewing Co., one of the nation's first craft breweries, before starting his own landscaping business in Seattle. Having brewed his own beer ever since graduating from Oxy, Odell found that living in



The brains behind the beer: Corkie, Doug, and Wynne Odell relax in the company's renovated tap room.

Seattle—a mecca for craft brewing—further whetted his appetite.

In those formative days of home-brewing, it was difficult, if not impossible, to get the malt, barley, and other ingredients needed to make good beer. Forced to use inferior ingredients such as dried yeast and canned malt extract, Odell's early beer looked like a beer should: golden-colored, slightly carbonated, with a head of foam. As for the taste, "It was drinkable—a cross between apple cider and cheap Champagne," Odell says wryly.

But he had made leaps and bounds in his craft by 1989, tinkering with brewing processes and refining recipes until he had settled on the formulas for what would become 90 Shilling and Easy Street Wheat. Then he made the jump into the beer-making business. Together with his wife, Wynne, and Corkie, Doug started Odell Brewing in a 75-year-old converted grain elevator with \$135,000 borrowed from family and friends and an abiding belief in his skill and masterful touch as a brewmaster.

His family had just moved from brewery-saturated Seattle to start their business,

and knew no one in Fort Collins besides Corkie. "People thought we were crazy," recalls Odell, who made those early sales calls and deliveries out of his old mustard-colored Datsun pickup.

Beer-making is hard, backbreaking work. There's a lot of climbing, stirring, lifting, and cleaning. Shoveling out and sanitizing a 50-barrel mash tun—a large stainless steel tub that converts malt or meal and water to wort, a key component in beer-making, will get you in shape faster than any boot camp. Odell brewed the beer, and he and Corkie cleaned the equipment. Meanwhile, Wynne did the books at night and cared for their young children (Corey, now 23, and Riley, now 20) while working a full-time job as a financial analyst at Hewlett-Packard.

The Odells also had their hands full educating restaurants, bars, distributors, and customers about craft brews. "People didn't know what a microbrewery was," Corkie says. "I'd call some accounts about our beer, and they'd say, 'Is that something you concoct in a bathtub?'" Despite the risks, they felt confident the brewery would succeed.

"Doug is the kind of guy you want to get stuck on a desert island with; he's very mechanical," says Wynne, who married Doug in 1986 and now serves as company CEO. "I didn't have any concern that he would fail. I never once thought, 'What am I getting myself into?' We knew what our skills were."

She was right. Odell's beer caught on and word spread throughout the region. In 1990, the company sold 900 barrels, and double that number the following year. By 1994, sales of barrels had more than quadrupled to 8,100, and throughout this time, the beer was distributed in kegs. When Odell started bottling its beer in 1996, its revenue doubled in just one year, and volume grew by 60 percent to 16,000 barrels. Today, Odell's revenues are approaching \$15 million, and the company has expanded its distribution base to encompass Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

In focusing on the Rocky Mountain and Western Plains states, Odell Brewing opted to be a regional brewer rather than a national



ABOVE: When it's not snowy or icy, Doug and Wynne Odell commute via bike to company headquarters. Fort Collins is a bicycle-friendly community, with about 30 miles of paved bike trails. **RIGHT:** Odell stands next to 200 photovoltaic panels installed on the brewery's roof.

one because Odell likes the “be local, buy local” philosophy. (California is too far afield and poses other challenges—although that hasn’t stopped fans from buying Odell beer and shipping it back to the Golden State.) “I don’t want everything homogenous here in the United States,” Odell says. “We can’t be everything to everybody. If you go to England, beers are still regional there.”

The Odells believe in consuming resources wisely. So in 2010, when they expanded the brewery from 22,500 square feet to 45,000 square feet, they installed green-energy devices such as Solatubes, which use sunlight instead of electricity to light the warehouse; and 77 kilowatts worth

“We’re selling on quality, innovation, and green practices,” Odell says—but not on lower price. “People see more value in a \$9 six-pack of craft brew than a \$6 six-pack of other beer.”

of photovoltaic panels that provide close to 25 percent of the brewery’s peak energy demand. When temperatures dip below 40 degrees, a system turns off the beer-cooling system and blows in frigid outside air instead. Local farmers receive truckloads of spent grains for their animals, and porous paving stones in the parking lot capture and filter rainwater. True to their frugal nature, the Odells also recycled materials such as fixtures, lighting, and cabinets.

“We do have an impact on the environment, so it’s our responsibility to minimize



that as much as possible,” says Odell, who commutes six miles via bicycle to and from the brewing company as weather permits.

Another part of community responsibility is giving back and supporting local nonprofits and schools. Each month, co-workers (a term the Odells prefer to “employees”) choose three charities to receive revenues generated from the beer-tasting trays served in the brewery’s tap room. That amounts to \$1,500 to \$2,000 for each charity. The company also manages a grant program that gives micro-grants of \$1,000 to local nonprofits, and a “growing fund” that supports projects such as buying needed equipment for Colorado State University.

The liberal arts education Odell received from Oxy helps him view the business not just as a moneymaking venture, but also as a vehicle to empower its co-workers. The company holds quarterly meetings with the entire staff and has a five-person business team and a nine-person operations team, each member of whom has gone through a six-month management leadership program. And everyone has the opportunity to create his or her own signature brew through the company’s pilot system, Odell’s “portal

to beer Shangri-La,” the results of which circulate in the tap room weekly.

“I like creating an enormously collaborative team so decisions are not made in a vacuum,” Wynne says. “The involvement of everyone here is key to our culture.” In 2009, *ColoradoBIZ* magazine named Odell Brewing one of the best companies to work for in the state, noting, “In addition to traditional benefits, Odell supplies a weekly beer allotment to each employee.”

If that doesn’t make you want to spruce up your resume, consider this: After five years of employment, co-workers are treated to a week-long trip with the Odells to visit British breweries. The company also pays the education cost of those wanting to learn more about beer-making, and organizes an annual team-building and community trip. Over two days last year, in partnership with the Wildlands Restoration Volunteers, a Colorado nonprofit, the entire staff helped stabilize the banks of the Poudre River, which meanders through Fort Collins.

As Odell and his team continue to grow while experimenting and creating high-end innovative beers to supplement their regular offerings, another building expansion may be in the future. Not that Odell aspires to be a brewery magnate; at the end of the day, Wynne says, he’s still a “laid-back hippie.” 