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Hopped Up

A new Rust Belt-inspired microbrewery is set to hit the Valley.

By Vince Guerrieri



Mark Stahl

Ken Blair wants everyone to enjoy beer as much as he does.

"I've always liked beer," says the 10-year Youngstown police officer. "I think beer should be a celebration."

So it's only fitting that the new microbrewery Blair plans to unveil in October is, in part, a tribute to the Mahoning Valley. Blair is transforming the former B&O Station on Mahoning Avenue into the Rust Belt Brewing Co. and plans to distribute his beer to local businesses and restaurants.

"I think the area's ripe," he says. "I think what'll keep us afloat is the pride in having a microbrewery."

At one time, Youngstown had a thriving brewing industry, but the local breweries were gradually phased out with the rise of large beer makers such as Anheuser-Busch, Coors and Miller. Recent attempts in Youngstown to rebuild the microbrews —most notably at the same location Blair will make his go — have failed.

But Blair is undeterred by other unsuccessful tries. Those before him took an opposite approach, opening brewpubs that were restaurants first, breweries second. Blair plans to focus on the brewing and let the rest take care of itself.

"The mission is the beer," he says. "If we have a little restaurant, that's fine. That's not going to make or break the company."

A California native, Blair acquired a taste for good beer while stationed with the Army in Northern Bavaria, Germany, for four years. After returning stateside, Blair took an interest in regional microbreweries and three years ago started crafting his own beer.

After purchasing the brewing equipment located at the B&O Station, Blair is equipped to make 250 to 300 kegs a month. Rust Belt plans to make its first batch in October in time to tap for the dedication of the Spring Commons bridge over the Mahoning River.

As for how he will name each type of draft — a few of his beer titles will come from people who have meant something to him, such as his Old Man Hopper IPA, named for his stepfather Don Hopper, and an abbey ale called Abby Ale after his daughter, Abigail.

But Blair will draw on area history for the rest. His first beer will be an Irish Red called Rusted River, in homage to the Mahoning River. Also on tap will be a Blast Furnace Blonde Ale.

"If I break even, I'll be a happy man," he says. "But I feel deep in my heart that this will succeed."

A brief history of Valley brewing

1846: Englishman John Smith opens the Youngstown's first brewery on Federal Street.

1865: Philip Schuh and John Bayer open a brewery on Pike Street in Youngstown.

1885: John Bayer's brewery is bought by George J. Renner.

1925: After 79 years, the Smith Brewery closes due to Prohibition.

1934: Youngstown Brewing Co. opens. Its Crystal Top beer becomes one of the cheapest beers in the region at \$2.75 a case.

1962: Renner Brewery closes.

1991: The Valley's first brewpub, Meander Brewery, opens on Mahoning Avenue in Austintown and closes two years later.

1997: The Ohio Brewing Co. opens in Warren, but closes in 1999.

2002: The Ohio Brewing Co. reopens at the B&O Station in Youngstown, but closes in 2004.

Source: Brewing Beer in the Buckeye State by Robert A. Musson