

Two Metre Tall is a crafty brew

One very tall drop

The Sunday Examiner's PATRICK BILLINGS talks to Jane Huntington, a French and history teacher by trade who now runs and manages her own beer brewery with husband and former winemaker Ashley in the Derwent Valley.

What is a craft brewer of beer?

We believe a craft brewer is a person who practises the "craft" of brewing — for Two Metre Tall we place our emphasis on ingredient origin, variety and type. We brew our own beers, we do not replicate known beer "styles".

In the Australian marketplace there are a lot of beer brands made by the big industrial companies, with big marketing budgets, telling us they are craft brewers. We need to protect the use of the term "craft" and a national association of craft brewers has just been formed to do that.

How did you and Ashley find yourselves as craft brewers?

After many years winemaking in the South of France, we were keen to move back to Australia to raise our family and establish our own enterprise. We purchased our Derwent Valley farming property with the aim to plant a vineyard and make wine, but it was the hop fields at Bushy Park and the historic oast houses at New Norfolk that captured our imagination. Being from winemaking stock, the obvious question from being surrounded by all of this "beer agriculture" was "where are the breweries"?

We felt the consumer was ready to drink beer as diverse and high quality as the wine they had become accustomed to drinking. So instead of planting grape vines, we planted our own cereal crops and hop vines. It was an opportunity too good to miss.

How did you establish Two Metre Tall as one of the first craft breweries in Tasmania?

We have taught ourselves everything, and literally from the ground up, which is why we are probably a bit "syncopated" with modern brewing speak and modern brewing styles. We start with growing ingredients and follow the beat of our own drum from there.

The first thing we did was plant a barley crop . . . being winemakers, we felt that was the logical first step.

Funnily enough, we still find ourselves as the only brewer in Australia growing their own malting grains.

We also needed hops but were very unimpressed with the idea of using the pelletised product, so we established our own hop field.

From there we were hooked.

What do you do at Two Metre Tall?

We operate a vertically integrated family farming business. We farm 600 hectares on organic principles. We grow malting grains and hops, which we use to brew our real ales. We feed all water and brewery waste streams to the Black Angus/Wagyu cross cattle that we breed and fatten, before serving and selling at our on-site cellar door facility known as the "Farm Bar". What we don't grow ourselves on



Jane Huntington runs and manages her own beer brewery, Two Metre Tall, with husband and former winemaker Ashley in the Derwent Valley.

Picture: SIMON DE SALIS, Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment.

the farm we source directly from other farmers across Tasmania, such as apples from the Huon Valley, pears from the Tasman Peninsula, hops from the Forester River region, spelt from further up the Derwent Valley to name just a few.

It remains a unique farming concept in the Australian agricultural context.

What's wrong with the way mass-produced beers are made and consumed?

The Australian beer market is far too concentrated. About 90 per cent of beer consumed in the country — and that is a lot of beer — is made by two brewing companies. This is a far greater market duopoly than Woolworths and Coles enjoy in food retailing and is a very unhealthy and anti-competitive scenario for the responsible Australian beer drinker.

Our beer drinking culture is also too oriented towards the most alcohol for the cheapest price (leading to much of the societal negatives resulting from excessive alcohol consumption), which the products from the above-mentioned industrial brewing giants feed at great profit to themselves.

Mass-produced beer in this country also includes more ingredients than just water, malt, hops and yeast like a good beer should. Consumers must be made aware of all the "non-beer" additives routinely employed in these "cheap grog" products; sugar, preservatives, head stabilisers, colours, bittering extracts, etc.

Craft brewers and their genuine, flavoursome and varied products are making a small, but ever increasing and important, stand

against these three "beer industry negatives".

Can beer be as refined and complex as wine?

Bloody oath it can be . . . and this from a winemaker!

Ashley has been more challenged by brewing beer than he ever was in the wine industry. He looks for complexity, acidity, fruit sweetness, hop varietal difference, colour, aroma and all the characteristics you look for in wine.

If you can understand that "wine" is a plural word representing a vast family of beverages made from grapes, then you must also understand that "beer" is identical in concept and is not just a singular gassy beverage mass produced by a couple of large corporations as it all too often appears in the Australian market.

In your opinion are beer

drinkers becoming more sophisticated in their tastes?

Beer drinkers in Australia now look for variety and quality in the ale, beer, lager, porter, stout they drink. People are interested and seek out beers from across Australia and the world. Beer drinkers are no longer just found standing at the front bar of a pub, but beer is increasingly being thought of and consumed in a manner previously reserved for wine.

This change is thanks to the still small but continually growing craft brewing industry in Australia.

We encourage our customers to drop the "stubby holder and frozen cans" mentality. We urge them to pour our beer into a glass. This gives you the chance to look at the beer, smell it and then savour it. From this point of learning, anything could happen . . . and craft brewers across the nation are probably already brewing beers that previously you may have never even dreamed of. It is very exciting.

What are the challenges of running a craft brewery in Tasmania?

Excise costs are a national challenge for all craft brewers — the cash flow pressure this federal tax places on a small business is almost criminal. No other business model in the world taxes new and existing businesses 30 per cent of their income, in cash, every week of the year before they have received the money for the sale being taxed and before they are tax-profitable and have a capacity to pay.

The government needs to enact excise reform for small brewers as a matter of urgency. It is placing a huge brake on a burgeoning industry, which is largely based in rural and regional Australia and the existence of which will cause more positive change in the way our society consumes and treats alcohol than any other health and well-being measure currently on the table.

Without a large advertising budget how do you gain exposure for your products?

As a small brewing business, with no marketing budget, we are always seeking new ways to communicate with our customer. One way to do this is via Twitter and Facebook. We post regular updates on the season and what we are doing on the farm as well as in the brewery.

Food and wine festivals also raise the profile of a business such as ours and put us directly in front of the customer. People are so interested in the story behind the ale and cider — they want to know where it came from, how it was made and who made it.

Our Friday "Farm Bar" sessions are also a great way for people to visit the farm and see a working brewing business. They have the opportunity to meet the people behind the brews they drink and share a hand pumped ale with them.