Home brew

Sonia LeBoeuf grabs bottles of Abita Amber to place in 12-bottle packs as the beer comes off the bottling line at Abita Brewing Co. near Abita Springs.

Popular L.a. beer helped by area’s ‘perfect’ water

By CHERAMIE SONNIER
Assistant Food editor

ABITA SPRINGS — An idea by two home brewers in the 1980s led to Abita Brewing Co., now one of the oldest craft breweries in the United States.

In 1986, the St. Tammany Parish-based company began brewing beer with the pure artesian water of Abita Springs at the site which is now Abita Brew Pub.

That first year, the then-microbrewery produced 1,500 barrels of cold-filtered beer. By definition, a microbrewery makes 15,000 barrels of beer or less a year, Chief Financial Officer Patrick Gernon explained. Each barrel holds 31 gallons.

By 1994, demand for Abita Brewing's products resulted in the move to its current 24,000-square-foot facility a few miles up La. 36 from its original site.

Sales in 2002 reached about 39,000 barrels of beer and 1,700 barrels of root beer, Gernon said, and he’s confident the regional craft brewery's beer production this year will climb to more than 40,000 barrels, or about $6 million in sales.

Sixty-five percent of Abita Brewing's sales are in Louisiana, but its distributors sell Abita Beer to retailers in 30 states from California to New York, company President David Blossman of Covington said.

The brewery owners opened the Abita Brew Pub in the mid-1990s and sold it in 1998. The current owners of the Abita Brew Pub have a license agreement with the brewery to use the trade name and sell brewery merchandise.

Within the first year of Abita Brewing Co.'s operation, Blossman, one of the original investors, and his five brothers bought out the largest shareholders. He said the two home brewers, Rush Cummings and Jim Patton, are no longer affiliated with the company.

In addition to Blossman and his brothers, the chief financial officer said the investors are David Blossman's father, Fred Blossman of Covington; Sazerac Co. Inc. of New Orleans; and "10 or so smaller owners. The Blossmans have controlling interest."

Abita Brewing Co. prides itself on doing “just-in-time production” from order to delivery, Gernon said during a tour of the company’s facility on an approximately 8-acre site half-way between Abita Springs and Covington. "Our beers go to the wholesalers within two or three days of bottling."

“We make our beers as fresh as possible,” agreed Peter Boettcher, brewmaster and production manager.

Because the cold-filtered beer has no preservatives, additives or stabilizers, the company code dates all its beer for freshness on its labels.

Abita Brewing produces five flagship beers —

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Two fermentation tanks, each holding 300 barrels, or 9,300 gallons, of beer, bear the logo for Abita Brewing Co.'s beers.

Abita

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Amber, brewed with crystal malt; Golden, made with an English lager malt; Turbodog, a dark ale; Purple Haze, a raspberry wheat brew; and Andygator - and five seasonal brews: Bock, Red Ale, Wheat, Fall Fest and Christmas Ale.

A six-pack of Amber, Golden, Turbodog or the seasonals retails in the Baton Rouge market for about $4.99, company officials said.

The brewery also makes Abita Root Beer, which company literature says is made with pure Louisiana cane sugar and with a brewing method that accentuates "the traditional herbal flavors found in American root beers of the 1940s and '50s."

"We soon will have an Abita Select, a draft-only beer," Gemon added.

The company, which has 28 full-time and four part-time employees, operates from 9 p.m. Sunday through 10 p.m. Friday.

The ingredients for making its beers and also Abita's spring water, malted barley, yeast, hops (and wheat for the company's specialty beer) - are combined in the brewhouse. It takes seven or eight hours to make one batch, which equals 100 barrels of beer.

Beer-making starts with milling the malted barley, which gives beer its flavor and color. The milled barley is added to hot water to activate the enzymes formed during grain germination to convert the starch in the grain to sugar, Blossman said. Next comes sparging where the sugars are extracted from the grain bed. The result is called wort, which is unfermented beer.

"We have a pretty state-of-the-art system" to brew beer, David Blossman said, including "the first Merlin wort boiling system outside of Europe. It reduces the energy required to boil the wort ... That produces a higher quality wort."

Hops, a dried flower used for giving beer its bitter taste and flower aroma, are added at different intervals while the wort is boiling. Later the wort is spun to remove solids formed during the boiling process.

The wort is then cooled, and yeast is added to convert the wort's sugars to carbon dioxide and alcohol, David Blossman said.

Fermentation takes seven to 10 days depending on the type of beer that is being made. Once fermentation stops, the temperature is dropped, and the beer goes to an aging tank for one to three weeks. Next the product goes through a micro-filtration process. The beer is then held in a brite (finished) beer tank until it is bottled or put in kegs.

Throughout the beer-making process, employees take quality control samples and taste samples. The company operates "a full-service quality control laboratory where we do both chemical and biological analysis," Gemon said.

Blossman said the company adheres to the 1514 German Rein Act which limits the ingredients for making beer to malted barley, water, hops and yeast.

"Barley is what beer should be made from, not rice or corn, which are cheaper substitutes. They add little flavor to beer compared to barley. That's why our beers have more flavor than the major brewers in the United States and major importers who use corn or rice."

Abita Brewing also can take its water straight from the source, Blossman said. "To make a good beer, your brewing water has to taste good, have the right mineral content and pH levels. Almost all brewers have to chemically treat and filter their water, and we don't have to do that."

"This water is perfect for the brewing styles of beer we make. Pilsen in the Czech Republic near Prague is one of the few breweries that also has perfect water."

Abita Brewing Co. offers tours to the public, usually at 1 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Saturday and 1 p.m. Sunday; call brewing headquarters at 985-893-3143 to be sure.

For more information, write Abita Brewing Co. at Post Office Box 1510, Abita Springs, LA 70420; e-mail abitabeer@abitabeer.com or check its Web site at http://www.abitabeer.com.

Patrick Gernon, left, chief financial officer, and David Blossman, president of Abita Brewing Co. LLC, stand on stairs leading to the company's brewhouse. Its Merlin wort kettle, where unfermented beer is boiled and hops added, is above and behind Gernon.

Just like it does with its beers, Abita Brewing Co. makes its Abita Root Beer in small batches with the pure artesian water of Abita Springs in St. Tammany Parish.