Craft beer industry on the rise

South Louisiana based companies find success

By Nicholas Persac

Andrew Godley quit his stable job as a chemical engineer in January, despite months of economic woes and a harsh hiring landscape across the country.

But Godley didn't look to another employer for his next paycheck. He turned to beer.

Godley, 31, founded and owns the Broussard-based Parish Brewing Co., and since January he's worked to get a new brewery up and running. He began brewing beer recreationally about six years ago, and by July 2010, he was selling beer in small quantities to a handful of Lafayette bars.

Godley, however, couldn't meet the demand for his beers, as he previously split his time between the engineering job and a 1,000-square-foot warehouse he used to make two 40-gallon batches of beer each week, or enough to fill about eight kegs. He sold his beers only in kegs then, and fans of the Parish Brewing Co. could only find his signature Canebrake, which is made with sugar cane syrup from the Abbeville-based company Steen's, inside Lafayette Parish.

Now, Godley makes 1,000 gallons of beer in a single batch. His new 8,000-square-foot brewery allows him to not only increase the volume of beer he makes, but also allows him to sell more styles of beer, package the drinks in bottles and expand into different markets, including New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

"The craft brewing industry in Louisiana is still very young, but the potential for the future is huge," Godley said during an interview at his brewery Thursday. "There is a huge tide right now of craft beer fans and consumers that's driving the culture here and moving toward more, and better, craft beer that's made here in Louisiana and across the Gulf Coast."

More than ever before, the craft beer industry in Louisiana is expanding as drinkers flock to stores and bars to imbibe local beers like Parish Brewing Co.'s Canebrake. Though craft beers, which are typically made by small breweries, account for only a small portion of the beer industry's overall economic output in the state, the demand for Louisiana beers is increasing, and several experts predicted the craft beer industry will continue to grow during the next decade.

The big business of beer

In Louisiana, the beer industry contributes a total economic output of more than $1.8 billion each year and accounts for a direct economic value of $868 million, according to the Beer Industry League of Louisiana, a non-profit organization representing Louisiana's independent beer distributors.

With more than 12,000 retail establishments across the state selling beer, the industry employs more than 20,000 people. The Beer Industry League of Louisiana also reports that the beer industry contributes more than $171 million in taxes to the state each year and generates another $210 million in business and personal taxes.

"We're starting to see a new trend and demand for craft beer in Louisiana, and those craft breweries that are already operating in Louisiana have been very successful thus far," John Williams, executive director of the Beer Industry League of Louisiana, said during a phone interview Friday. "In the next 10 years, I would expect that we'll see some more craft breweries established in Louisiana, and those already operating will grow."

Godley's Parish Brewing Co. is only one of at least seven commercial craft breweries in south Louisiana — Abita in Abita Springs, Bayou Teche Brewing in Arnaudville, Heiner Brau in Covington, NOLA Brewing in New Orleans, Parish Brewing Co. in Broussard, Tin Roof Brewing Co. in Baton Rouge and Dixie, the beloved New Orleans brand that's been brewed in Monroe, Wis., since Hurricane Katrina and subsequent looters wrecked the business's brewery in 2005.

"All of the craft breweries in Louisiana have probably had nearly 50 percent growth each year for the past two to three years, and there is plenty of more room to grow," Karlos Knott, brew master and co-owner of Bayou Teche Brewing, said during a phone interview Thursday. In Lafayette alone, beer lovers have the opportunity to sample hundreds of craft brews at festivals, including Saturday's Gulf Brew, Top of the Hops and soon, the Louisiana Beer Festival. Hundreds of people flocked to Parc International on Saturday.
to try an array of craft beer made across the state, country and globe.

"Our local beers outsell everything in this bar," said Charles Godley, host of the chef, and if it were up to me, that wouldn't be the case," Kailen Fagerts, manager of The Green Room Bar in downtown Broussard, said during a phone interview Thursday. The Green Room offers patrons 12 Louisiana beers on tap and another eight in bottles.

La. left behind?
The Pacific Northwest and the West Coast are both well-known for craft breweries, and single cities, like Portland and San Diego, are home to far more micro and nano breweries than the entire state of Louisiana. The Colorado Brewers Guild reported this year that craft beer alone pumps nearly $450 million into the state's economy annually.

"I think Louisiana and a lot of the Gulf Coast has been left behind in the craft beer movement," said Knott. "Our continual sales have been high and we don't see the same growth every year. There is a tremendous burden and business regulations on Southern brewers that's not placed on other breweries.

Charles Caldwell, co-founder of Tin Roof Brewing Co. in Baton Rouge, said Louisiana's craft business industry is gaining a lot of steam in the next 10 years, perhaps the next 10 years, perhaps 20 years. He said the beer lovers across the world.

"It's really inspiring to look at Louisiana as a state and where we have been, and where we are going," said Caldwell during a phone interview Wednesday. "The major areas now have great breweries, and we have a few of smaller breweries are popping up elsewhere. It's a good thing - Louisiana will be on the map in the brewing world soon. We're a little behind now, but the South in general was the last area to catch on."

Next to Godley's brewery in Broussard, tall rows of sugar cane crew an empty lot. Godley bought the land as an investment to someday build a tasting room there. He'd like to let patrons sample and buy his beers directly from his business, but Louisiana's laws won't allow him to do so. Loosening some regulations, he said, will encourage other craft brewers to open shop.

Godley estimated that selling 15 percent of his production directly to customers at full retail prices would increase his revenues by 50 percent and potentially contribute 60 percent of his overall business. Under Louisiana law, Godley currently sells his beer to distributors, who then provide the products to retailers, who sell the alcohol to consumers.

"We really need to buy up on what we're allowed to do here," Godley said. "I think I would be on board if they just realized the huge economic benefit.

Louisiana's craft breweries, however, tend to work together and see the business competition as friendly rather than cutthroat.

"What's good for one craft brewery is good for all of us," David Blossman, President of Abita Brewing Company, said in an email. "As craft breweries, we need to work together to promote the craft beer as a category. Sure, we all keep an eye on what the other guy is doing, but in the end, giving consumers more variety in the craft category is a good thing for all.

The business owners and brewers meet several times a year as part of the Louisiana Craft Brewers Guild. There is a certain level of competition, but everybody is working towards spreading the craft-beer gospel," Caldwell said.

All about flavors
For craft beer drinkers and brewers, it's all about the flavor. The creators and consumers all want something new and surprising flavors that span beyond the water-like taste of many traditional lagers.

"The Louisiana beers have great tastes and flavors," Fenerty said. "Not only is it being brewed locally, but the beers also use local ingredients. I haven't had any one local beer and then heard something negative about the flavor. Craft beer is an art, and there is a lot more love going into craft beer than into the typical domestic.

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Wilson, a professor in LSU's Food Science Department, teaches students how to make beer as part of a lesson on fermentation in his Food Preservation course. Wilson, an avid home brewer, also keeps tabs on the beer industry in Louisiana. He said the craft beer industry "eeks and flows" as some breweries close and others open. Louisiana's craft brewing, he said, is on the upswing now, and for craft beer drinkers, flavor is the top priority.

"It's definitely picked up," Wilson said. "Most of the commercial breweries have gone to relatively bland types of beer because they want the broadest appeal, but a small brewery can have a market and sustain sales for people who want more interesting flavors, from more hops to a bitter taste.

Knott said craft beer is a natural fit for Louisiana because the bold flavors are often paired perfectly with Cajun and Creole foods.

"People in Louisiana like having choices," Knott said. "With so many different foods within our cuisine, people will want to drink a different beer with their etouffee, gumbo or crawfish. It's easier to pair Louisiana food with beer than with wine.

Changing of the guard
Dixie and Abita are Louisiana's two most iconic beers.

Dixie, founded in 1907, is immortalized as the drink of choice of Ignatius Reilly, the main character in the Pulitzer Prize winning novel "A Confederacy of Dunces." Abita, founded in 1986, is now sold throughout Puerto Rico, and its brand is captured in an array of movies and TV shows like HBO's hit TV show "True Blood.

Dixie, however, hasn't been brewed in the state since Hurricane Katrina wrecked the business's brewery at the intersection of Tulane Avenue and Toni Street. Loopters stole many cooper and metal pieces of beer brewing equipment. Dixie's head brew master still travels from Louisiana to Puerto Rico, according to Dave Brit, a Dixie spokesman.

Dixie's current owners, Paul Wilson and his wife, have also both been Dixie drinkers. "Why would you want to go to a Red Lobster when you're in Lafayette and drink a Coors Light," Brit said. "It's kind of like the guy who was reading Batman comic books as a kid and wanted to be a superhero when he grew up. We've all been drinking beer and decided it was something we wanted to make."

Lucas' said his everyday desire to "buy local" has partly fueled the craft beer industry and even home brewing. "We've all been drinking beer and decided it was something we wanted to make."

Drunkers' awareness of what exists beyond the major light beers, he said, has really been a piece of the Louisiana scene, they've basically been reared on it. The image, brand and beer represent what America is all about: preserving through hard work and growing anything for granted.

During its first year of production, Abita brewed 1,500 barrels of beer. This year the increase in local about 150,000 barrels of beer, including more than 1,500 barrels which will be donated to charities, Blossman said.

"Louisiana people are proud of their culture and their heritage," Blossman said. "We're working to support our own local favorites, and they love sharing that knowledge with the rest of the country. Both nationally and locally, the growing variety of craft beers has outpaced the major brands. In a tough economy, our company is growing, and that's a good thing for us and for our community.

Brewing at home
The craft beer movement isn't gaining steam only at small-scale commercial breweries. The number of Louisiana experimenters with beer brewing kits has risen and appears to be on the rise.

James Lutgring, vice president of Lafayette's non-profit, educational craft beer organization Dead Yeast Society, said Louisiana's beer scene has really evolved in the past five to 10 years. "He said he's in love with craft beer and has recently begun bottling beer."

Parish Brewery owner Andrew Godley stands near a 55-gallon drum of Steen's Pure Cane Syrup, used in his beer-making process, at his brewery in Broussard, which has recently begun bottling beer.