



BREWERS

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THE ESTABLISHMENT BREWERY

Calgary's Multiple Award Winning Brewery reminds itself to have fun

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"WHEN WE STARTED THIS THING WE SAID TO EACH OTHER LET'S MAKE SURE WE HAVE FUN, BECAUSE THERE'S GOING TO BE A LOT OF FREAKIN' WORK. AND LET'S BE HONEST, STARTING A BUSINESS LIKE THIS IS PRETTY RIDICULOUS," SAYS MIKE FONIOK. "THERE ARE A LOT OF SACRIFICES INVOLVED BUT AT THE END OF DAY WE ENJOY WHAT WE DO, THAT'S WHY WE DID IT IN THE FIRST PLACE."



And a little less than three years since opening in Calgary's Manchester Brewing District, the brewery Foniok started with fellow founders David Ronneberg and Brandon Hart, is going from strength-to-strength. Both critically and in the role it plays in the local community.

You want awards? Ask the team at The Establishment Brewing Company. In recent months, the company has scooped no less than 13 of them. In addition to being recognized as Canadian Brewery of the Year and presented with five individual beer awards at the 2021 Canadian Brewing Awards, the Calgary business went on to pick up Alberta Brewery of the Year and seven beer awards at the 2021 Alberta Beer Awards.

Among the beers acknowledged were the brewery's Barrel-aged wild beer output, which include Erlton Street (2020) a Golden Sour, Ruby My Dear a Red Sour with Raspberries, Belgian Ale Funkmorphosis and Born to Run, a Brett Saison.

"It feels good to be recognized for those beers because of the amount of effort that goes into them. When you look at the volume we sell of our 'conventional' output

compared to these barrel-aged beers, and the amount of work that goes into them, it's disproportionately larger," he laughs. "So it's nice to know people appreciate them!"

The Establishment Brewing Company opened its doors in January 2019, but its story started many years earlier thanks to the Cowtown Yeast Wranglers homebrew club, a Calgary-based club of homebrewers and beer enthusiasts.

It's here Foniok would end up meeting David Ronneberg. Not only would the duo develop their love of beer, but they would also become Beer Judge Certification Program-certified judges, too. For Foniok in particular, his passion for brewing took over, and it's been "a slow decline into brewing obsession ever since". Which is good news for fans of great beer.

While the trio were bonded by the Cowtown Yeast Wranglers homebrew club, the house that Foniok and Hart shared also played an integral role in those formative days. Located on Erlton Street in Calgary, the team describe it as part house and part brew lab.

Named The Establishment, it was a place

they gathered, slept, brewed, grew a garden, lived the good life. At some point or another, at least six of their friends called the place home. And it was Hart who found The Establishment sign on a snowboarding road trip and propped it up in the window. "Everyone agreed it suited the place and the name stuck," they said. The sign now



rests above the bar at the taproom. However, things didn't always go smoothly. In the days leading up to June 19, 2013, Alberta, Canada, experienced heavy rainfall that triggered catastrophic flooding described by the provincial government as the worst in Alberta's history. And said flood did its worst on this Erlton home.

Foniok was living in the basement at the time and lost everything he owned. For days they pulled debris and mud out of the basement, but the strength of friendships and good will in the community brought The Establishment back to its feet.

The unforeseen benefit of all this destruction, was that a completely gutted basement was the perfect space to set up a new home-brew system. The brewing and experimentation rose to new levels, and soon the medals from various home-brew comps were rolling in. The original Establishment has long since been demolished, but it's memory lives on.

"For us, The Establishment is about sharing the love of beer. Nothing more, nothing less," adds Foniok.

While Calgary played an integral role in the early days of the would-be brewery, so did European beer culture. Having met Brandon Hart during their time studying engineering at the University of Calgary, they would undertake a year-long internship in Switzerland. While Foniok would work at Alstom, Hart headed to automation firm ABB.

"Unsurprisingly we drank a lot of great beer in Europe," he recalls. "So when we came

back we were like 'Hey, where's all the good beer?'. Having access to so much great beer for a year and then losing that really sparked our desire to make our own. And that's when we fell down the rabbit hole."

The duo would join the venerable home-brew club, meeting Ronneberg and the rest, they say, is history.

Enthused by European beer, Foniok's first homebrew kit recipe was a Hefeweizen. Half of which was donated to his ceiling. "It blew out of the carboy top, which was interesting...," he smiles. '

But he kept going, and rightly so.

"I really enjoyed brewing German-style lagers, because my philosophy was that there is nowhere to hide with those. If I could figure out how to brew a really clean Helles or German Pilsner then I knew I was on the right track," he recalls.

While Foniok was enamoured by those styles, Hart's passion lay in mixed-culture, wild ferment output. Beers that have played a big part in the brewery since day one.

Following a wealth of success in home-brew competitions, the trio would soon realize that it was now or never when it came to making the step to professional brewing.

"I felt that if I don't do this then I could regret it for the rest of my life," he explains.

And not ones to do things by halves, the team decided they wanted to open a brewery with a barrel program right out of the

gate, something that is far from straightforward without a brewery of your own. To make this happen, they called on a contact brewing partner. A move that enabled the brewery to launch with four barrel aged Brett Saisons from the get-go.

"From day one it has been a huge priority to keep the the barrel program going. We didn't want to become that brewery that just has a couple of barrels tucked away in the background somewhere," says Foniok. "Instead, it was a priority and something at the forefront of this business."

While those maiden barrel-aged beers were being taken care of, the team would sign a lease on a property in Calgary's Manchester Brewing District in May 2018. Located on 1 St SE, the brewery has a wealth of brewing and distilling neighbours.

"We were very fortunate in that this site was the second we looked at. It has really developed in the last couple of years so it was something of a no-brainer to choose here," explains Foniok.

And with their collective engineering backgrounds, the team would undertake much of the work on the build themselves. "We're probably kind of stupid in that way," he laughs. Foniok would design the brewery's glycol systems and also specify the brew-house, personally adapting the CAD files to his own requirements.

Ronneberg, an excellent woodworker, would build a large proportion of the taproom including a striking hanging bulk-head. "There was a lot of blood, sweat and



beers, that's for sure," he says. But it created an emotional attachment to the space. So we don't regret doing it. But next time? I definitely would not!"

The Establishment brew on an oversized 15HL brewhouse that can "comfortably" cast out 20HL into a number of flexible FV sizes ranging from 15 through to 30, 45 and 60HL.

"If we're experimenting with something new, we can brew it on a smaller, slightly smaller size, and kind of blow through that quicker," says Foniok. "And if we're brewing our core beers then we can stockpile a little bit extra in the larger tanks, so to have that flexibility is really nice."

Those four core beers comprise Afternoon Delight, a 5.4% New England Pale Ale, My Best Friend's Girl, a Kölsch-Style Ale at 4.8%, Jam Rock, a 5.6% Blackberry Sour with Vanilla and Sky Rocket, an ever-changing series of New England IPA.

These beers complement The Establishment's seasonal output as well as its decorated Barrel-aged releases. Beers of all styles and ABVs.

"Our philosophy has always been not to discriminate against any beer styles. Because there's something for everyone in beer as it's such a diverse drink," he says. "From Lager to an Imperial Stout, to a Hazy IPA and Barrel-aged Sour, they are completely different and mean different things to different people. Our hope is to always introduce people to new ideas."

The brewery's award-winning Barrel-aged beers are matured in its family of 90 barrels.



the majority of which are used red wine vessels. Designed for long-term ageing with minimal oak expression imparted to the beer, these releases have helped the brewery scoop those prestigious accolades in a productive end to 2021.

"Honestly I can't believe it. We've always dreamed about something like this happening when we planned the brewery and it's unreal to find ourselves here two and a half years after opening. This absolutely would not have been possible without the support and passion of our team, a team that's become more like a family at this point," Foniok explains.

One particular release that remains special to the team is Erlton Street. A Barrel-aged Golden Sour that showcases a blend of their favourite barrels and named after the street where the original Establishment home was located. And Erlton Street 2020 was one of the beers awarded Gold at the recent Canadian Brewing Awards in the Wood & Barrel-Aged Sour Beer category.

And such successes will no doubt be mirrored in the years to follow. There's just the small problem of space, or lack of, to sort first.

"Right now we're really tight on space. We've hit something of a roadblock on how we can expand the barrel program," he says. "The problem with barrels is that they take up so much room. They're fine when stacked vertically but when you're working on 20 of them, they take up a lot of space!"

But this hurdle hasn't prevented their desire to add a koelsch and foeders to their armoury.



He explains: "I'm curious to see how our cultures would perform in larger vessels. I know the dynamics are different with the surface to volume ratio, but I just love the idea of being able to play with them and to learn more."

"What's inherently important is striving for balance in these beers. With some barrels you lose control of what's happening in there to a certain extent, so it's a case of then having the ability to find another barrel that complements the acidity level or maybe the Brett expression. For me, that journey is absolutely vital to make a great-tasting, mixed-culture beer."

And regardless of when those new vessels arrive, or where they'll be housed, there's one guarantee and that's the team will enjoy working with them.

"Barrels have their own personalities and the diversity of them is part of the magic," he says. "Dave, Brandon and I all have technical backgrounds and engineering is very much science driven."

"So I think that's maybe we're all so enamoured by wild fermentations. It's all very laissez-faire, eclectic, and wild. I think it brings an element of art to the process, which keeps us all coming back."





FROM JANES AND JOES TO ALL-OUT PROS



Name: Michal Foniok
Location: Calgary, Alberta
Brewery: The Establishment Brewing Company
Time in Professional Brewing: 3 years
Job Title: Head Brewer / Co-Owner
Time as a Homebrewer: 10+ years
Homebrew Club: CowTown Yeast Wranglers (Calgary)



What was it about Homebrewing that contributed to you wanting to do it for a living?

It became a true passion. The more I went down the rabbit hole of brewing, the more I became fascinated by it. Some hobbies fizzled out after a few years, but brewing just kept going for me. All I thought about and wanted to do was related to beer, it felt natural that this was my calling.

Favourite aspect of Homebrewing and why?

Learning! Beer is a life-long learning lesson. There is so much to experiment with and discover, and a life-time isn't long enough to master it all.

How did you transition from homebrewer to where you are now?

I gathered a team of fellow passionate homebrewers/friends, and we took the plunge to start our own business. I quit my mechanical engineering job along with my business partner Dave Ronneberg (an awesome brewer that I met in the same homebrew club!) and we started The Establishment Brewing Company in late January 2019. The rest is history!

Since going Pro, what do your daily duties consist of?

My role started off doing pretty much everything at the brewery: recipe design, sourcing and ordering ingredients, scheduling brews, brewing, cellar duties (dry hopping, harvesting yeast, washing tanks), managing and maintaining the barrel program, scheduling and packaging (cans, kegs, bottles). However recently a lot of those duties have been taken on by the great team we have built here, which consists of: a production manager / brewer, 2 brewers, and a packaging lead.

What exciting things are you currently working on?

Oh, where do I start! We're really excited where the mixed fermentation barrel program is going at The Establishment Brewing Co., so we're working on expanding that. On the horizon is getting a Koelsch, and hopefully expanding our collection of barrels (over 80 now) to beyond just mixed fermentation (think bourbon barrels for imperial stouts, etc!). But first...we need a little bit more space.

Any words of wisdom for people new to homebrewing?

Find a local homebrew community or club near you (I'm sure there is one). Homebrewers are a wealth of knowledge! I would suggest starting with the basics, making simple beer really well. Build off of that strong foundation before jumping into crazy styles. I also suggest looking into the BJCP and becoming a certified judge. Having a developed palate and sensory training is critical to making great beer!

