

BREAKOUT BREWER

The Barrel-Riders

Three years after opening in Calgary, **The Establishment** has ridden its mixed-culture creations to the height of respect in Canada's beer scene—winning medals, winning fans, and running out of room. **By Scott Messenger**

ONE DAY, MIKE FONIOK would love to have a coolship. It would be a logical next step in the former mechanical engineer's obsession that began with getting into homebrewing more than a decade ago.

However, that coolship installation won't happen soon, as he and his team are too busy adjusting to the success they've had since opening in January 2019. Anyway, there's nowhere to put it. The Establishment, in an industrial zone in Calgary, Alberta, has become like a very healthy starter culture: a dense state of organized chaos.

Like many breweries, The Establishment is built as a reverse mullet: The party's up front in a tidy, warmly lit taproom featuring clean lines and natural wood; the business is in back, where a narrow, labyrinthine path radiates from a 15-hectoliter (12.5-barrel) brewhouse to two rows of conical fermentors, a canning system, some stray kegs, stacks of empty cans reaching toward the 17-foot ceiling, and a garage-sized walk-in

stuffed with cold, packaged beer for shipping across Alberta.

Maybe it's not fair to call this chaos. Everything is in its right place—if only because there is no other place any of it could be.

"We are desperately out of space," says Foniok, the cofounder and head brewer.

Those shiny fermentors do their share of the work, escorting along a popular selection of everything from hazy pale ales to IPAs to porters, plus occasional oddballs such as an imperial sour, a potato lager, and a Lichtenhainer. However, just across the brewery are the vessels that have played a major role in shaping the reputation of The Establishment: oak barrels stacked three high on their sides. Somehow, they squeezed in about 80 of them.

The contents of those barrels are the reason that the Canadian Brewing Awards in September 2021 named The Establishment the country's best brewery, after it medaled in *Brett* beer, fruit beer, and the barrel-aged

categories. The following month, the brewery also won top honors at the increasingly competitive Alberta Beer Awards, where Foniok and his team placed in mixed-fermentation categories and five others.

Then, that thing happened that brewers always *hope* will happen after winning medals: Sales surged.

"It's still going," says Foniok, looking around the space with an expression that might be acceptance. For now, that coolship is a dream. Really, The Establishment is doing remarkably fine without it.

After the Flood

Foniok and his fellow cofounders—general manager Dave Ronnenberg and Brandon Hart, who keeps a separate day job—are resourceful people. Ronnenberg once lived in a 110-year-old house near downtown Calgary. It was small for two people, let alone one homebrewer with gear. At his wife's suggestion, he moved the brewing operation to the backyard shed—then he insulated and updated the 8-by-12-foot wooden shack into what he christened "ShedPub," complete with a keezer.

Meanwhile, Foniok and Hart were making the most of a disastrous situation. Friends with Ronnenberg through their homebrew club, they lived in a nearby rental house on the banks of the Elbow River. In June 2013, that put it in the path of Calgary's worst flood in 81 years, when intense rain and meltwater off the Rockies to the west caused the Elbow to surge above its banks. The house—the original "Establishment," named after an old-timey sign they found on a snowboarding trip—was inundated. So was the home brewery that Foniok kept in a corner of the basement.

When they were finally able to move back in, the bottom-floor walls had been removed, so brewing took over the entire space.

"That's when the beer journey took a steep incline," Foniok says as we sit in the taproom, joined by Ronnenberg and brewer Natasha Peiskar. "Or decline?"

Ronnenberg smiles. "It's slopey."

Foniok set up a makeshift yeast lab and immersed himself in the "nitty-gritty of homebrewing." Separately, so did Ronnenberg and Hart. They racked up awards, earning BJCP credentials (Foniok is a nationally ranked judge) and experimenting with every style they could. When Alberta's beer scene

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PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CURIOSITY CALGARY; PETER KACZAN(3)



MAKE IT

The Establishment Left My Wallet in El Segundo

A fan favorite at The Establishment, this recipe is a nontraditional take on Lichtenhainer, a light, oak-smoked wheat beer. Pineapple melds with the smoke to create a grilled-pineapple impression. The key ingredient is the oak-smoked wheat—other smoked malts will not have the same effect.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 73%

OG: 1.047

FG: 1.010

IBUs: 6

ABV: 4.8%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

4.6 lb (2.1 kg) German pilsner

4.6 lb (2.1 kg) Weyermann Oak Smoked Wheat Malt

1 lb (454 g) rice hulls

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

Food-grade lactic acid (see below)

0.7 oz (20 g) Hallertauer Mittlefrüh at 20 minutes, second boil [6 IBUs]

4.4 lb (2 kg) pineapple puree, pasteurized, in primary

YEAST

Lactobacillus plantarum; Escarpment Kölsch (or other clean German ale/Kölsch strain)

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains, mix with the rice hulls, and mash at 153°F (67°C) for 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are relatively clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as necessary to get about 6 gallons (23 liters), depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 60 minutes without a lid. At flameout, add food-grade lactic acid to adjust pH to 4.5. Cool wort to 97°F (36°C), paying close attention to sanitation during this stage. Pitch *Lacto* and stir with sanitized spoon. Cover with sanitized lid and keep warm (close to 97°F/36°C) until the wort acidifies to 3.6 pH—about 24–36 hours.

Bring the wort to a boil and boil for 30 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. Chill to about 61°F (16°C), aerate well, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at about 61°F (16°C). Once gravity has dropped to about 1.020, add the pineapple puree and allow the temperature to rise to about 64–68°F (18–20°C) until fermentation is complete and beer passes a forced diacetyl test (see “Hunting for Diacetyl,” [beerandbrewing.com](#)). Rack beer off the yeast and fruit into a corny keg purged with CO₂. Crash and carbonate to at least 2.9 volumes.

BREWERS' NOTES

Bacteria: You can replace the *L. plantarum* with your own favorite *Lacto* strain—a half-cup of probiotic yogurt works, too!

Fruit: You can make your own puree from canned pineapple or, ideally, freshly ripe pineapples. Keep in mind that pineapple has an enzyme (bromelain) that deteriorates head-forming proteins. If using fresh pineapple, consider heating the puree to pasteurization temperatures to denature the enzyme—either boil or hold at 176°F (80°C) for at least 8 minutes—then cool before adding to the fermentor.



started to surge like the Elbow, they decided to ride the wave from hobby to career.

Craft brewing in Alberta started in earnest in 1985 with Calgary's Big Rock Brewery—now publicly traded, with a market cap of just under \$40 million Canadian (about US\$32 million). True small-batch brewing, however, had to wait until the provincial government lifted a minimum production requirement of 500,000 liters per year in late 2013. The industry went from roughly a dozen breweries to about 130 today. They are largely concentrated in Calgary, now one of Canada's top beer destinations.

“In terms of differentiating ourselves from other breweries,” Ronnenberg recalls, “it's like, ‘What are we going to do differently?’ Because to a certain extent, you can't just make better beer than everybody.”

Their hell-bent-on-variety homebrewer mentality would help, but they knew it wouldn't be enough in an industry already defined by shiny new things.

To them, the answer was obvious: Go wild.

The Broken-Wheel Theory

Inspired by barrel-aged beers from the likes of Cantillon and Russian River, The Establishment has focused on mixed-culture fermentation from the start. They've learned a lot about controlling variables—and that they can't control all the variables.

Their first batch fermented in stainless steel with a Belgian ale strain before going into barrels with a fresh shot of wild yeast and bacteria. It was a national award winner—but thereafter, The Establishment opted for a more “laissez-faire” approach, Foniok says. They wanted to align more closely with traditional methods and produce beers with the sophisticated funk of Belgian lambics.

Their goal was to produce pleasant surprises.

“Dave has a good analogy,” Foniok says. “Mixed-culture beer is like pushing a shopping cart with a broken wheel. The brewer can have only so many inputs. You have to be okay with that ... and allow the beer to express itself.”

There are reliable parts of the shopping cart, of course, such as the wort. The Establishment starts its mixed-culture fermentations with pale, red, or brown bases that rely heavily on German pilsner malt, raw wheat, and whole-leaf dried hops. They conduct a turbid mash, in which liquid is removed and boiled before conversion occurs, preserving starch to feed the microbes living in the oak of the barrels and shaping the flavor of the final product. “We're actively trying to preserve those cultures,” Foniok says.

Once the wort is in the barrels, they further inoculate the wort with a house mix of *Saccharomyces*, *Brettanomyces*, *Lactobacillus*, and *Pediococcus*, derived from a previous barrel that produced a desirable beer. Attenuation, which can drop below 1.000, is only one indicator of completion. The team regularly checks barrels for the stabilization of flavor, once the microbes have emptied a pantry that includes not only sugars and starches but also each other's metabolic by-products and autolyzed bodies. Once they have perhaps a half-dozen complementary barrels, the team blends—and shamelessly nerds out on their sensory analysis.

“We’ve got some palates here,” says Peiskar, a certified Cicerone who also has passed the BJCP entrance exam.

“Hell yeah, we do!” Foniok says.

Often, they add fruit, with the base worts influencing their choices of raspberries, blackberries, tangerines, and more. Bottle-conditioned batches sell out almost entirely via the taproom. Normally, they can release a new mixed-fermentation beer every month.

“We almost make beers ahead of the science, or the understanding of what’s behind [the process],” says Peiskar, who has a degree in chemistry and worked in two other Calgary breweries before The Establishment. “There’s a lot of magic to the barrels.”

Some have more magic than others. There are barrels in the brewhouse that have been quietly bubbling away for more than two years and have yet to stabilize for blending.

“We’re excited to see where they’re going,” Foniok says.

Living the Delusion

Those unpredictable barrels are a bit like the brewery: Foniok and team don’t know exactly where the business is headed; they’re just content to enjoy the wild ride that has made them the country’s current most-heralded craft brewery.

While they’d like more space, growth isn’t a priority; it’s been organic. The early days were marked by an almost endearing delusion, Ronnenberg says. “Mike and I were like, ‘We’ll just do everything ourselves! We’re going to make the beer ourselves. We’re going to work the taproom ourselves. We’ll do sales ourselves.’” Reality set in soon after the busy opening weekend. The Establishment now has about 20 staff, most of them full-time.

Yet they remain interested in growth as brewers. The awards have validated their emphasis on variety and experimentation, as well as the artisanal inefficiency that has made it stand out in a crowded market. Only 4 or 5 percent of what they sell is



Clockwise from top left »
Mike Foniok; Natasha Peiskar; Dave Ronnenberg



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mixed-culture beer, but it takes the most work. They’re proud of that.

While chatting in the taproom, Foniok, Ronnenberg, and Peiskar laugh about the effort demanded by a beer they released a few days earlier: Fraction of the Sum, a zesty golden sour made with British Columbia apricots. When the fruit arrived—400 kilograms—everyone dropped everything. “The fruit’s the boss,” Foniok says. “Production has to stop.”

For a few hours, the owners, brewers, a delivery driver, production staff, and even the bookkeeper pulled up a circle of camping chairs and pitted fruit. (They also used about a third of the pits when aging, producing notes of almond and amaretto.)

“It’s fun,” Ronnenberg says. “You get to sit around and chat.”

It sounds a lot like homebrewing with friends, with everyone excited to contribute to the experiment and hoping for a little magic along the way—even if there is more to worry about these days.

Despite its quick rise, The Establishment isn’t far from its basement-brewery roots, with some ShedPub thrown in for good measure. “The homebrewing community is all about learning new things and trying crazy ideas,” Foniok says. Theirs is a crowded space, but it “allows us to live that dream. That’s very important to us. Luckily, we’re able to continue doing that.”



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PETER KACZAN; COURTESY THE ESTABLISHMENT; PETER KACZAN; COURTESY THE ESTABLISHMENT