

## **The First Days of New Belgium Brewing Company, Inc.**

*by Jeff Lebesch, Founder*

In honor of the 30th anniversary of New Belgium Brewing Company startup in 1991, I have put together a brief synopsis of the formation of the company and intensive efforts surrounding the first product introduction.

As a home brewer since 1980, I watched the American craft brewing industry grow from its infancy to something of a real



*Original "Fat Tire" Stumpjumper in England, 1985*

presence, and I wanted to be part of that movement. Throughout the 80's I studied beer and brewing, took a bike ride through the UK in 1985 which I called the "Fat Tire Pub Crawl," and in 1987 took my first tour of Belgium and became enamored with the variety and quality of beers available there. An epiphany moment in the Brugs Beerje specialty beer bar in Brugge, Belgium that year steered me towards study of Belgian style beers which I practiced in homebrewing, with an eye towards commercial brewing.

In 1988, I met Kim Jordan through mutual friends; we married in 1990. By 1989-1990, I felt that I had the business and brewing experience, and a bit of money, to open a "micro brewery" specializing in Belgian style beers. I suggested to Kim that starting a brewery would be an interesting and challenging endeavor, she agreed, and we embarked upon a business path that far outgrew our wildest imagination. We chose the name New Belgium Brewing Company to make clear that our focus was to emulate Belgian beer and beer culture, and through the very American practice of attaching "New" to a European geographical location, we were an American company.

My focus was on a brewery design that would work within our very limited budget,

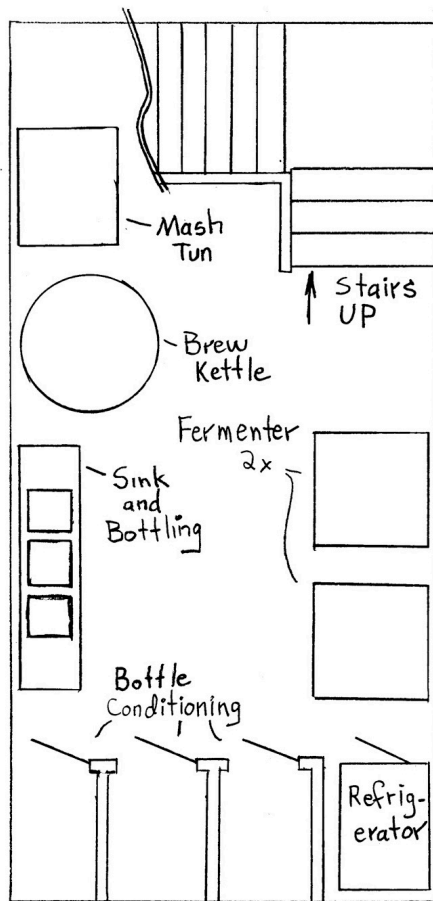


*The first brewery, in a narrow basement under the west (left) side of this house, 1991.*

purchasing some equipment and tools, and fabricating everything else. Kim turned her thoughts to the business organization and principles by which it should exist. In April, 1991, she organized the "Easter on a Rock" pow-wow for the two of us in Rocky Mountain

National Park, where

we wrote the first edition of Core Values and Beliefs which would guide the decision making process of the company. That such a thing could exist, a statement of values and beliefs, was all new to me. In all of my previous employments, the show was run top down by old white men, who pressed for economies of competitive wages and low benefits in order to maximize their profit. Kim disdained that business model, and believed that we could treat the people and the planet with respect, operate as a family friendly organization, and forge a high quality business model with the highest quality product standards. While I agreed with treating people fairly and held a strong energy conservation value, I had never considered a business model that would honor these ideas. The foundation of New Belgium's success was: without my vision of a commercial brewery producing Belgian style beers, my innovation in equipment and process engineering, and my beer recipes, New Belgium would not exist; and without Kim's vision of forward thinking, inclusive, and innovative business models, New Belgium would not have become what it is today.



*Basement brewery layout*

In the autumn of 1990 we started the expansion of the tiny house on Frey St in Fort Collins I had built as a bachelor. Given property line setback limitations, we could only add 12 feet to the west side, (left side on the drawing above), and a basement, where the brewery would be located. We planned about a year to finish construction and build the brewery, with introduction of our first beer in September, 1991.

However, the Colorado Brewer's Festival, an annual celebration of Colorado craft beer and breweries, was to be held in Fort Collins late in June of 1991, and we decided that this was a cannot-miss deadline. If we needed beer to sell by June 21, the day before the festival, I had to be brewing with confidence, and have the first two brews in-the-can (fermenter) so to speak, by at least two weeks prior. Many steps were needed

between turning on the lights and water in the new brewery, and carrying beer out the door. We had eight months to get it all done, and a tight budget.

One of the greatest challenges during that period (that few people know about) was getting approval to operate a commercial brewery in a space attached to a residence. There were city and state requirements, which were manageable, but the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms balked at the concept. I cited a BATF approval of a similar operation in California as a precedence. In early March of 1991, as we were nearing the end of construction, I was told by my local agent that he "had no hope" of approval, but at the same time told me the names of persons farther up the authority chain to contact, and even suggested wording I

should use. The final approval did not arrive until May of that year, just weeks before brewing began.

My basement commercial brewery design closely resembled that of the home-brew setup I had been using in my kitchen since 1988. The insulated mash tun, circular and electrically heated brew kettle, and bottle conditioned beers, all were scale up versions of the kitchen brewery, by a factor of about 13 times. I had to finish extensions of plumbing and high-power electrical from the house into the basement brewery by myself, and devise and install refrigeration equipment for the fermenters. I had to make sure raw materials were ordered, finalize my recipes, and test the equipment. Deadlines are great motivators.

## New brewer hops on bandwagon

### New Belgium to bottle beer from basement

By ROBERT BAUN  
The Coloradoan

MAY 30 1991

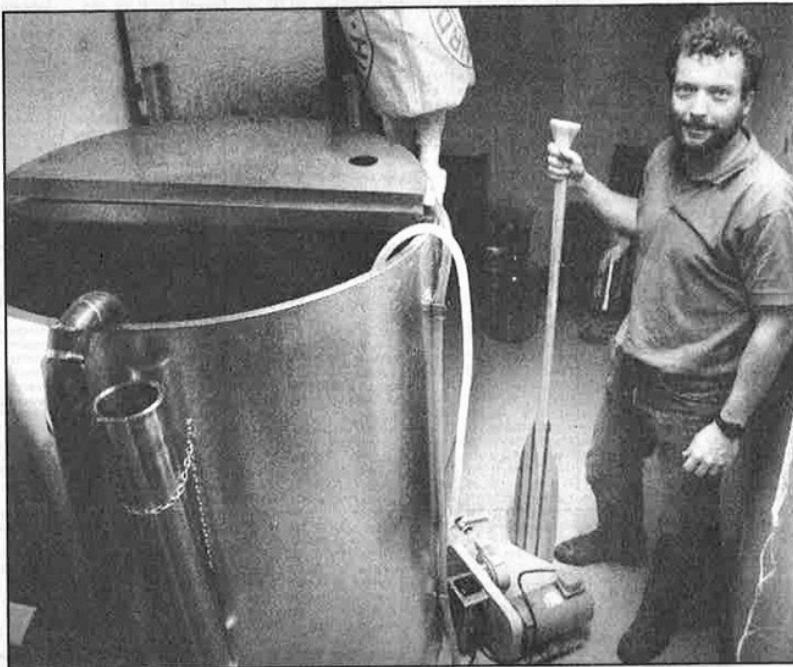
A fourth microbrewery has opened for business in Fort Collins, tapping into the city's growing reputation as a haven for beer connoisseurs.

But instead of rolling out the barrel, the New Belgium Brewing Co. is putting its beer — and faith — into bottles. New Belgium's brewmaster Jeff Lebesch hopes to sell his beers through local liquor stores, a market heretofore untouched by the city's three established microbrewers.

"All the other microbrewers are making draft only," Lebesch said. "The two pubs are selling mainly on the premises, and Odell's sells by the keg only. That leaves the bottle market for package liquor stores wide open."

Lebesch is joining the Odell Brewing Co. and two brewpubs, CooperSmith's and the Old Colorado Brewing Co., on the city's list of microbrewers.

Local liquor stores have been encouraging, Lebesch said. "They are fairly enthusiastic to take on a local product," he said. "And if it sells well



Rich Abrahamson/The Coloradoan

**NEW BREW:** Jeff Lebesch stands with a mixing paddle next to a kettle in his basement brewery. Lebesch has started the New Belgium Brewing Co., the fourth microbrewery in Fort Collins. Lebesch will bottle his beers and hopes to sell them through local liquor stores. The beer will be contained in European-style 650 ml. (22-oz.) bottles, with 12 bottles to a case.

*First local press, May 30, 1991*

By May of 1991, with paint still wet on the walls and equipment still to be assembled, I planned the beginning of production. I was wrapping up test brews of Fat Tire (a recipe and name I'd been using since 1985) and Abbey, which were to be our first product introductions. My last home-brew ever, a Fat Tire, was May 20, 1991.

By late May, I was commissioning the new brewhouse, testing plumbing, pumps, the kettle steam condenser, and the home-made 20KW copper sheathed, electric immersion heater, which today is known as the "chicken foot" and is on display in the brewery museum. Raw materials were ordered, including pre-milled malt, bottles, and labels. I was pressed for time, and wished I had two more weeks for testing and evaluation of the equipment and my last Fat Tire test brew, but the deadline loomed. I had to go, whether completely ready, or not. June 04, 1991, was New Belgium Brewing Company's brew batch #1.

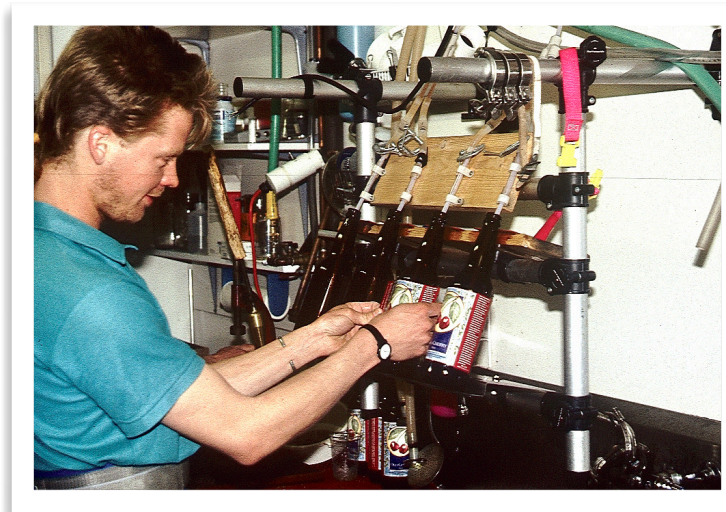


*Malt weighing and grist bags*

The night before the first brew, I had filled 5 soft-sided, 50-pound grist bags with the Fat Tire formula, weighed out at the remote warehouse and carried home in our Toyota station wagon. Surprisingly, that first brew went smoothly, with the process control reasonably on target for a completely new and manual operation. The work day was at least 12 hours long, learning as I went how to stay ahead of the process, especially the cleaning. Two days later, I brewed the first batch of Abbey, and these two brews were the first of our beers sold in the retail market, and served at the Colorado Brewer's Festival. Through the week prior, I had propagated ale yeast for the Fat Tire and the special Belgian yeast for Abbey, a tricky process that I had never done on such a scale before. But, both fermentations kicked off with a healthy start, and I was happy with the results.



A week after brewing, it was time for packaging. One of the great advantages to bottle conditioned beer is that bottles of it are filled before carbonating, greatly simplifying the filling process. Bottle conditioned beer, with a slight film of yeast on the bottom of the bottle, is also a common presentation of Belgian specialty beers, so I was offering stylistically true beers. For bottle filling, I built a 4-spout filler of plastic tubing on an aluminum frame that hung above the large 3-basin sink. The beer would be pumped directly from the fermenter, through an in-line cotton bag filter to catch the hops and other larger solids. The bottle fill level was controlled



*Mark Beck filling and labelling bottles, 1992*

installed a revolution counter on it to stop the pump when the bottles were full. It was an economical and accurate system. Labels were the wettable-adhesive type.

On packaging day, first I boiled a few liters of water, added the priming sugar, which was poured into the fermenter just before bottling started, and given a quick stir with a paddle. For Fat Tire, this sugar

solution also included a significant dose of hops, known as a dry hopping or post-kettle hopping, which added a marvelous flavor and a well known character of that first-generation beer known as the "Fat Tire hop burp." In this first-ever bottling run, I tried to work out a reasonably efficient flow of loading bottles, managing fill level, applying labels and caps, and stacking cases in the conditioning closet. The bottling process for a full brew of 60 cases would normally take about 3 hours. This first packaging, however, required that I also fill two kegs of each beer for the Brewer's Festival, which went much faster than bottling, once I figured out how to get the beer into the keg. Once filled, the bottles were stored for 4 days at warm

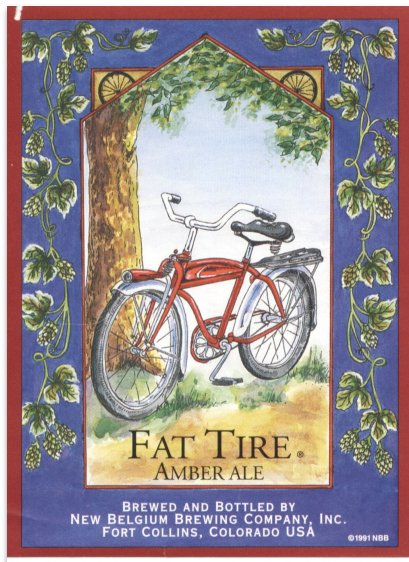
room temperature for the secondary fermentation in the bottle and carbonation development. Then ideally, the beer would be cold aged for several more days before release, but this time we were shaving hours and days from the “ideal” in order to get the product out the door on schedule. Each day, a bottle was cracked open to evaluate its carbonation and flavor profile.

The fermentation of Abbey made the brewery smell much different than the Fat Tire. Its special yeast produced the wonderful and exotic aromas of raisins, banana, and clove, and this aroma penetrated the house to some extent during the peak of fermentation. The first Abbey was bottled two days after the Fat Tire, but a sample I had taken from the fermenter

showed the color to be too light, and I felt that I needed to make a color correction before releasing the beer. Though I had scaled up my formula carefully from the home-brew scale, it appeared that the extraction efficiency for the various malts was different in the larger size batch than in the home-brew scale. I took some crushed black malt and boiled it with the priming sugar, and added these solids directly to the fermenter, expecting them to be captured by my in-line sock filter. The color looked good, the flavor was great, and bottling went fine, but towards the end of the second keg fill there was apparently a slug of these malt solids that entered the sock filter, which clogged it and caused the filter element to burst. Some of this malt made its way into one of the kegs. A week and a half later, while being served at the Brewer’s festival, I was told by an alarmed server that “coffee grounds” were coming out of the tap. I saw it, indeed it was embarrassing, but it was just temporary. We purged and discarded the settled malt solids, and the remainder of the keg flowed clear.



*Brian Callahan capping bottles, 1992*



*Fat Tire original label*

The day before the festival, Friday June 21, 1991, I was ready to release and sell the first beer of New Belgium Brewing Company. I had an order for one case each of Fat Tire and Abbey from two bars in Fort Collins. The Town Pump, the first establishment ever to sell Fat Tire, was the first drop, followed by the Mountain Tap Tavern, where I shared a beer and brewery stories with the proprietor, the affable beer fanatic Jim Parker.

That sale day I had one problem that had never occurred to me; I had no sales invoice or other means to record the transaction. I was ready to take \$48 cash for two cases each, but that was not a complete business transaction. I hand scribbled an invoice on a generic note pad, and wish I could find one of those invoices now.

Saturday was the festival, we were in, the beer was good, and we had lots of visitors to the booth to try it. That hot sunny day was glorious, miraculous, and infinitely satisfying. The idea to operate a small craft brewery and sell fine products to consumers had been in my head for 10 years, and there I was, celebrating with Kim and friends. Through obstacles, distractions, and years of diversions I had generally stayed the course, and brought my dream to fruition. Fantastic!



*Prototype and final Abbey labels*