

Full Sail Brewing Company

By Edwin Battistella

Founded in 1987 in Hood River, the Full Sail Brewing Company is one of the earliest craft breweries in Oregon. Originally called the Hood River Brewing Company, the company now produces about 100,000 barrels of beer a year, sold in bottles, cans, and kegs in twenty-eight states.

In the 1980s, microbreweries were opening up throughout the Pacific Northwest. By 1984, the Widmer Brewing Company and the Bridgeport Brewing Company had begun operations, and within a year the Oregon legislature allowed brewing and retail sales to take place on the same premises. The craft brewing movement was underway. One of those attracted to the new industry was Irene Firmat, who had worked as a buyer in the fashion industry in New York City before relocating to Portland. She and her partners—Jerome Chicvara, Meg Roland, Joe Hill, and Roger Barry—chose Hood River for the site of their new business.

The Hood River Brewing Company opened in late 1987 in the vacant Diamond Fruit canning facility in Hood River. The partners converted the apple press room to a brewhouse and made 287 barrels of beer during its first year of operation. It began bottling Full Sail Golden Ale in 1988, using a repurposed Italian wine-bottling machine. As one of the first craft brewers to bottle its product for retail sale, Full Sail reached a market thirsty for craft beer. The brewery's signature Amber Ale and Brown Ale garnered gold medals at the Great American Beer Festival in 1989, the first of about 150 gold medals the company would receive.

The company's first brewmaster was David Logsdon, a cofounder of the company that had started Wyeast Labs in 1985 (Wyeast makes fermentation products for brewers) and Logsdon Farmhouse Ales in 2011, both in Hood River (Logsdon is now located in Washougal, Washington). Jamie Emmerson, executive brewmaster, joined Full Sail in 1988, bringing with him an undergraduate degree in organic chemistry and a diploma from the Siebel Institute of Technology in Chicago and the World Brewing Academy. He and Firmat married in September 1989.

Full Sail launched a four-million-dollar expansion in 1994, almost doubling its production facilities from about 50,000 barrels per year to 90,000. In 1998, as sales slipped to 67,000 barrels, Full Sail's board of directors voted to sell the brewery and entered into negotiations with United Breweries. In response, Firmat and Emmerson organized a bid that allowed the brewery's forty-seven employees to become the owners, the first brewery in the United States to establish an employee stock option plan.

In celebration of its new independence, Full Sail launched a Brewmaster Reserve lineup of showcase beers. The brewery also began producing eleven-ounce, snub-nosed bottles of a lower-alcohol Session Lager in 2005, initiating what would become a trademark Session series. In 2018, the company was making about twenty different beers for distribution throughout the United States.

Beginning in 2003, Full Sail entered into two five-year contracts with MillerCoors to brew beer for the Henry Weinhard label. At one point, Full Sail was brewing as many as 50,000 barrels of Weinhard beers a year. The additional revenue allowed the company to continue to improve infrastructure, which included a remodel of the brew pub, which overlooks the Columbia River, and pioneering cost- and water-saving efficiencies. Following the lead of Alaskan Brewing in Anchorage, it became the second American brewery to produce wort—the sweet, malty liquid extracted from grain by mashing—by using the Meura mash filter, a process that uses about a half the water of traditional production methods. Full Sail also added its own water treatment plant and a hot-water recovery system to the brewery in Hood River and continued its commitment to local sourcing of ingredients and sustainability. A founding member of the Hood River Green Smart program, the brewery has received several awards for sustainability, including 2013 Gold Level recognition by Travel Oregon.

In 2015, after a vote by the seventy-eight employee-owners, Full Sail was purchased by the Oregon Craft Brewers Company, an investment group that included San Francisco-based Encore Consumer Capital. Full Sail continues to operate independently, with Firmat and Emmerson leading

the company as CEO and executive brewmaster.

Sources

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