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Making beer is not a hobby that you hear about very often and few people are aware of the positive influence that homebrewing has had on the craft beer movement in Ontario. The truth is that a number of professional brewers in the province started off as homebrewers and were active members of The Canadian Amateur Brewers Association (CABA), which will be celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary next year.

Paul Dickey, now the brewer for Pepperwood Bistro in Burlington, was the first president of CABA when it was founded in 1991. He began homebrewing in 1986 because there was a brewery strike in Ontario and beer was very hard to find. He made his first batch with his father-in-law and, in his words "it turned out well enough to do the next one". Even after the strike ended, Dickey found that there was good reason to continue homebrewing. He explains: "Certainly when I got involved, and for a number of years after that, it was a motivation of not having specific styles of beer available". In those days, if he wanted to sample a particular beer style, the only way Dickey could get his hands on it was to brew it himself.

Kevin Tighe is the current president of CABA. Though not brewing professionally, he is an avid homebrewer and shares a similar story about why he started brewing fifteen years later: "I really liked a couple of different styles that you just can't find. I'm a big fan of Russian Imperial Stouts. At the time, until I started going down to the States, I couldn't find any. So I made a couple to see how they turned out". Now that Tighe's work sends him to the U.S. on a regular basis, he has access to a wide selection of Imperial Stouts, but he still continues to brew his own. Tighe has taken his homebrewing to the next level by analyzing which particular aspects he enjoys in each of his favourite craft brewed Imperial Stouts and then trying to "combine them all into making the ultimate beer".

Michael Duggan, currently brewing for Robert Simpson in Barrie, feels that "the great thing about brewing at home is that you can really make anything you want". Paul Dickey is also quick to let prospective homebrewers know that "brewing is not complicated". He adds that there are definitely a few things to keep in mind, such as "attention to hygiene, to cleanliness etc... but they're basic building blocks so once you have a procedure that you're consistent in doing, then it's hard to fail". When Dickey started homebrewing, there were other things to consider. He explains: "At that time if you wanted a piece of equipment you had to make it". Dickey says that building equipment appealed to the "McGuiver" in him. Duggan adds that his experience building his own brewing vessels really helped him "get a deeper understanding of the mechanics of the process"



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Phil DiFonzo, president and brewmaster at King Brewery in Nobleton, is even more emphatic when he states: "Homebrewing had really helped me a lot. I feel that I could do what I did professionally only because I was an amateur brewer". He then elaborates: "As a professional brewer I have a lot of my amateur ambitions in me and that is that I always want to make my beer better every time". DiFonzo started homebrewing in the late eighties and was making two batches a week year-round. Before opening King brewery in 2002, he had already brewed 150 batches of the King Brewery Czech Pilsner at home. "Our First batch of Czech Pils that came out of King Brewery was ready to go. There was no error in it, and it was due to the trials as a homebrewer that allowed me to get very close to what I wanted right off". Duggan, who was the original brewer at Mill St., agrees "the Tankhouse recipe is something that I have been making for over 20 years and I won gold medals in CABA with it".

Duggan adds that another benefit of having homebrewed is having had the opportunity to "experience using different ingredients different yeasts and different temperatures. You can make any style. A lot of professional brewers just don't have the opportunity to do that". He also feels that judging and tasting a variety of homebrewed beers, through CABA, has helped him with his trouble-shooting abilities. "In a professional environment you should not be experiencing a lot of off-flavours in beer. I got that experience of tasting infection, oxidation and bad boils. Now I can taste the beer and I can almost tell you what went wrong if there's a problem with the beer. With CABA beer tastings, part of our job, if there was a defect, was to identify it and suggest how it was caused and what they might try to do to fix it". DiFonzo agrees: "Absolutely, my senses were sharpened as an amateur brewer and they were honed for what I had to do professionally". He adds, "I think that Homebrewers are the pioneers and there is no doubt in my mind that in the U.S. and Canada, some of the best brewers were homebrewers first".

Paul Dickey notes that the popularity of homebrewing in Ontario has had its ups and downs over the past twenty-five years. Interestingly, these trends are mirrored by the popularity of craft beer. DiFonzo adds, "I think the Ontario craft brewing movement has grown quite a bit in the past five years. It's nice to see that we have some new homebrewers that are coming on at the same time. It will create some balance". Duggan agrees "People who homebrew tend to be passionate about beer and this generates a beer culture for craft brewers to 'ferment' in". Tighe adds, from a homebrew perspective, "I've been in CABA five or six years. I find that homebrewers and people who are into craft brewing are after something. They're usually people who want to try something new, something a little different. If they can't find it they just brew it. That's what I did".



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Whether trying to discover new styles, working toward opening a craft brewery or just doing it for fun, there are many aspects of homebrewing to explore. Dickey feels that brewing at home is a hobby that anyone can get into, because you can experience whatever you want. You can be the McGuiver in the basement, you can be the Iron Chef designing your own beer recipes, or you can be the microbiologist cultivating yeast strains. And then there is the end product: In Paul Dickey's words "who can argue with a hobby that provides you with something you can enjoy on the back deck"!

To find out more about CABA, visit: www.homebrewers.ca

