

Like all great rivers, the Russian has its ebbs and flows. The same is true for the Northern California brewery by the same name. On the last day at the Korbelt Champagne Cellars location, I visited with Vinnie Cilurzo, the award winning brewer and now owner with wife Natalie of the new Russian River.



The new brewery, opening date to be announced, will be located in Santa Rosa, just upriver from the old location. As a brewpub, food will be served in the facility, but the menu will be limited to pizza, calzone, foccica bread and salads, all of which will be 'partnered out' so Vinnie can focus on the beer production.



In April of 2002 Korbelt made a decision to slowly work it's way out of the beer business by year-end. In doing so they graciously sold the Russian River name and brand to Vinnie and his wife Natalie. Vinnie plans to acquire used equipment, the old being sold off to the Great Dane brewery in Madison, WS.

One of the objectives of the new operation is to continue the three lines of beer including Hop Time, with it's 9lbs of wet hops, Pliny the Elder a double IPA, and the Porter. Another key mission is to further expand the line of approachable beers in the Belgian tradition. To this end, Vinnie will bottle a beer in a cork finished 750cl bottle with, of course, the proper glassware and the requisite logo. The production goal of 5,000 barrels per year is nearly double the old capacity.

The headwater of Russian River is actually in Temecula near San Diego. There, as a partner in The Blind Pig, Vinnie started commercially brewing and remained until December, 1996 when he sold his share in the brewery. Old ties to the area are retained in the form of his relationship with Greg Koch, co-founder of Stone Brewing, whose double IPA recipe is based on one from the Blind Pig. Only a few days before my visit, Vinnie sampled a '95 vintage of this beer created for the Pig's 2nd anniversary and found it still hoppy at 6.5%

Korbelt opened Russian River Brewing Company and a deli in early 1997 on the property of Korbelt Champagne Cellars in Guerneville, CA. The intent of the deli was to have a nice deli style restaurant as well as a public outlet for the RRBC brews.

Initially, the winemakers who were also home brewers felt they could do the job. They didn't have any special recipes, the usual Golden, Pale Ale, Porter and Amber, and hoped that



Liquid Assets, the equipment vendor could help them get started. Vinnie went to Korbels as a brewing consultant brewing his first batch on May 1, 1997 using the winemaker's homebrew recipes which they had been working on during the previous year. Over time, as Vinnie got more involved, he was able to upgrade the recipes to something he thought more suitable

Under Vinnie's direction the beers of RRBC could be split into three levels. The mainstream house ales include the Golden Ale, the Ragin' River Ale, the IPA and the Porter. The other levels included the heavily hopped West Coast style ales and the line of Belgian style ales.



In 1999 Vinnie began brewing Damnation, an 8+% Belgian style strong golden ale. That year it was entered in the GABF and took the gold medal in the Belgian ale category. And, in that same year RRBC also won a gold for its ESB, silver for the Golden Ale, Small Brewing Company of the Year and Small Brewing Company Brewmaster of the Year.

Russian River, with the beer flowing, began to cut new channels. After Damnation became a year around beer, Vinnie brewed a Belgian style single... Redemption, a beer with divine inspiration.

The Tappist brothers brew beer and make cheese to help meet the needs of the community and to fund their good works. They also are required to host visitors who are willing to live by the rules of the abbaye. In 1999 the visitors at Abbaye of Notre Dame de Scourmont, the producers of Chimay beer, included Vinnie & Natalie. This visit with host father Thomas and the experience of life in the Abbaye, inspired the production of Redemption.

Following Redemption, in 2001 Salvation was released, a Belgian strong dark at 9% with 3-4 years in the cask. This beer won a silver medal at the 2002 World Beer Cup. And, for those times when you think you have self-control regarding beer drinking comes... Temptation!



The original concept for Temptation was to make a lambic style beer. But Vinnie considered what he really wanted was Belgian style ale that showcased the brettanomyces. That's how in 2002 Temptation, a Belgian style golden ale aged in a white wine barrel for 9 months, inoculated with brettanomyces and bottled conditioned was born.

Vinnie consulted with head brewer Peter Bouckaert, of New Belgium Brewery and formerly of Rodenbach, on the use of brettanomyces yeast. He learned that a lower alcohol level was better for this strain. A second batch has been done with different, milder yeast and 3 stains of brettanomyces instead of just one as used in the first batch.

Since my visit with Vinnie, Temptation went on to win a gold medal at the 2002 GABF. So, we anxiously await the announcement of the grand opening of the new Russian River Brewery, the continued production of a fine, quality range of brews, and, most importantly, the further development of Belgian style beers with a West Coast accent.

