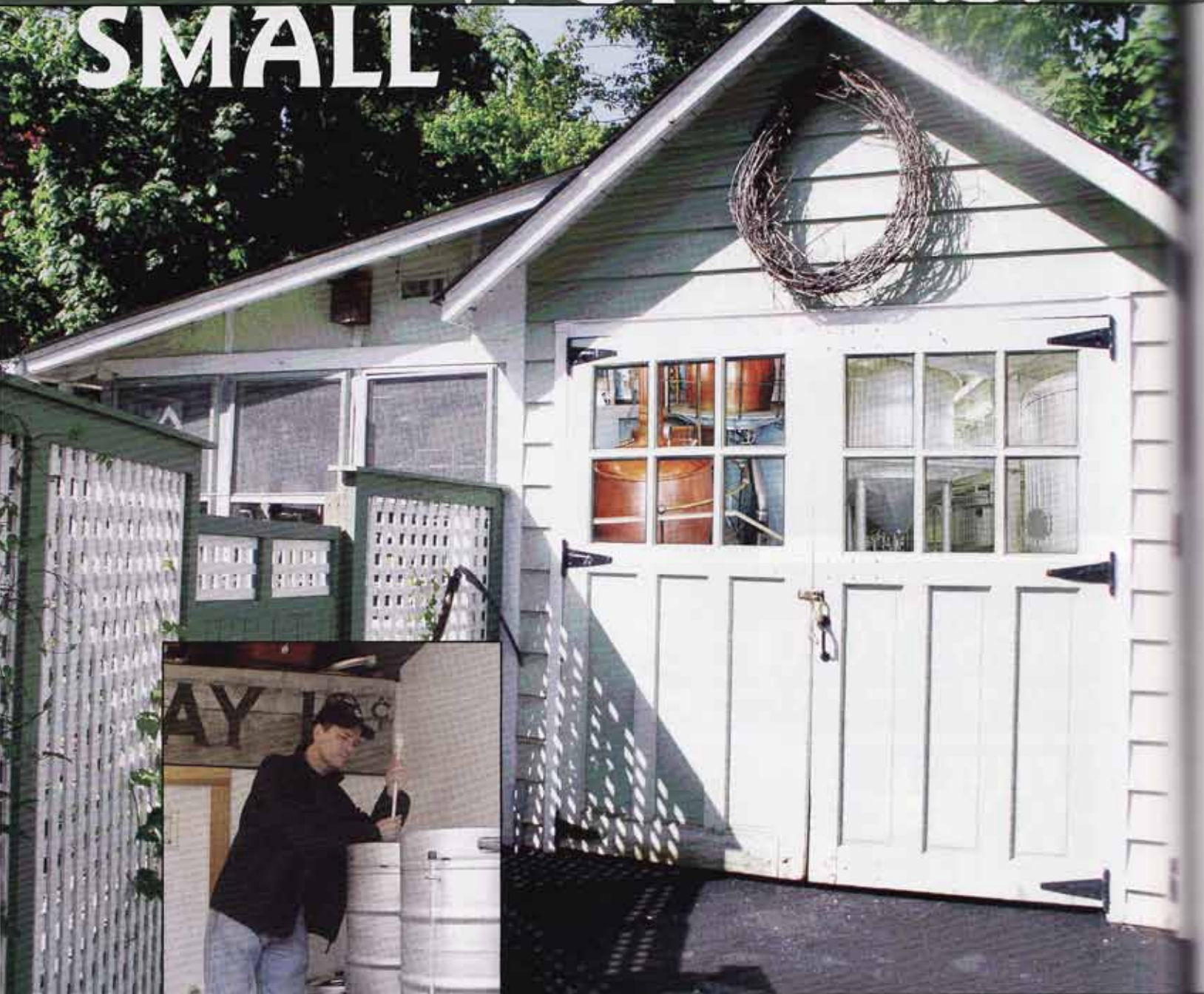


WONDERS: SMALL



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BY ALAN MOEN

Those of us who have watched the development of craft brewing in the United States in the last 30 years have witnessed the growth of tiny seedling breweries into full-fledged Sequoias. Breweries like Boston Beer, Sierra Nevada and New Belgium have risen from their humble beginnings to become national brands. Meanwhile, a strong tier of second growth has also filled out the craft brewing forest, with major regional figures such as Alaskan, Boulevard, Bell's, Brooklyn and Magic Hat.

But rather than discourage further growth as trees can do by limiting light and space on the forest floor, this evolving ecosystem has instead nurtured a host of new operations as small as its own humble beginnings in the formerly monocultural landscape of post-Prohibition American beer. They have become known as nanobreweries.

Like the "garagistes" in the American wine industry—which is also in the midst of a great boom these days—most of these small breweries make fewer than 100 barrels of beer annually. Most, in fact, make less than 50 barrels, with tiny brewhouses that amount to little more than ramped-up homebrewing systems. Even though they're not really a billionth the size of the "normal" brewery, as the name suggests, they can still be obscure and hard to find, relying on word of mouth as much as "hand-to-mouth." But that doesn't mean they're not successful at what they do, or that they don't make good beer.

BLIND BAT BREWERY

One such nanobrewery is the Blind Bat Brewery of Centerport, N.Y. Paul Dlugokencky, who works at his day job for a physics publisher as a peer reviewer of online submissions, started brewing as a hobby, then decided to try selling his beer. Dlugokencky started his brewery in his garage, naming it for the fact that he is both near-sighted and color-blind, and got his license in December 2008. Brewing on a Sabco Brew-Magic 10-12 gallon system, he has to do three batches to produce a single barrel. Brewing only on weekends, he expected to make about 20 barrels total in 2009.

Like many other nanobrewers, Dlugokencky doesn't sell draught beer. He hand-bottles his beer in 22-ounce bottles, and sells them to local beer stores as well as to a couple of restaurants and bars in the area. "My current scale is the 'proof of concept' phase," Dlugokencky admits.

But you can't just drop by his place and buy Blind Bat beer. As a production-only facility licensed for light manufacturing, Blind Bat can't sell beer directly to customers. But now that New York state has passed a law allowing small breweries to sell their wares at farmers' markets, Dlugokencky plans to give that venue a try, too.

Dlugokencky initially wanted to produce only seasonal beers, but his Hellsmoke Porter, a robust style made with his own smoked malt, has been popular enough to brew it more often, he says. Other Blind Bat



beers include Old Walt Smoked Wit (named for Long Island native son Walt Whitman), Wheatley Hills Weizenbock, and Beached Blonde, a Belgian-style blonde ale with just 4.8 percent abv.

"I do it for the love of it. I don't make a lot of money, although I'd like to," he admits. "I'm not making any plans for expansion. That depends on if the beers are received well enough."

WORTH BREWING COMPANY

Being well received has been the story of Worth Brewing Company, another nano in Northwood, Iowa, located on State Highway 105 near the Iowa-Minnesota border. Founder Peter Aussenhus and his wife, Margaret Bishop, began their small-is-beautiful operation in 2007. A homebrewer since 1987, Peter had worked at the Summit Brewery in Minneapolis, and also for Northern Brewer Homebrew Supply before he and Margaret decided to move to Northwood for its rural lifestyle 10 years ago. "It was a small town of Bud and Miller drinkers, a hundred miles from anything," Aussenhus says.

THE NEW BREWERIES

NANO

Left: Paul Dlugokencky stirring the mash at the Blind Bat Brewery, which is located inside the doors of his garage in Centerport, NY.

Above: Owners Margaret Bishop and Peter Aussenhus of Worth Brewing Company, Northwood, IA.