

Beer Nuts capitalizes on local love of fine brews

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Note: The small shop near campus offers almost 170 varieties and plans to increase it to 400 labels

Business partners Chris Donley and Chris Wilgus sell just one product, but they have almost 170 variations of it.

Beer. Their Beer Nuts Bottle Shop at 13th Avenue and Oak Street in Eugene opened last spring, underwent an ownership shift and has settled into a groove as word has spread this fall among students at the nearby University of Oregon.

"It's actually picking back up quite a bit (after a slow summer)," Donley said Thursday. "We're pretty excited, really. Most of our customers are students, and I think we're going to be a lot more well-known, once it gets out a little more."

The shop competes most directly with other local businesses that carry large beer selections - including the Bier Stein on 11th Avenue, Cornucopia Restaurant on 17th Avenue and the various Market of Choice locations.

But Donley said he was inspired more by the local popularity of beer than any specific business model.

"We are not necessarily targeting (other businesses), but the success overall in Oregon and the Northwest," he said. "Not only is there a great love of beer, but people see it a different way around here. There's a consumable appreciation for it."

And for Beer Nuts. The shop's MySpace page already has 685 registered "friends."

The shop's size is a limiting factor, at about 400 square feet. Donley said an additional cooler will be added soon, and he hopes to increase the selection to 400 labels within a couple of months. The store sells only carry-out beers.

The top sellers at Beer Nuts are from local breweries - Ninkasi and Oakshire - but the shop's inventory is loaded with domestic craft brews as well as imports ranging from Beck's to Zipfer.

"I think I have a pretty good taste for what's good and what's average," said Donley, who selects and orders the beers. "I like to say we carry aces - not deuces - here."

He's not sure what the total costs were to get the shop up and running, but said it was essentially a shoestring operation. If he and Wilgus are able to find a larger location in the same neighborhood when their lease on the current storefront expires next summer, they may seek a loan to expand their operation, Donley said.

An expansion would allow them to add a permanent tasting table and schedule weekly beer tastings. At its location eight blocks west of the UO campus, Beer Nuts offers only occasional free tastings - including one from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. today by Fire Mountain Brewery of Carlton.

"Hopefully, we won't have to move too far from campus, because this is a good location for us," Donley said.

The store originally was opened by George Wierichs, who brought Donley on as a partner and later left the business. Wilgus has since become a partner, but his role is limited while he finishes a business degree at Northwest Christian University.

Donley hopes to step back somewhat after Wilgus graduates and to finish his own business degree. The two operate the store by themselves.

The business is open from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday and Saturday. It is closed on Sunday.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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