

BRITE TANKS:

By Joe Wiebe



Tofino Brewing, Tofino, B.C.

Brewing on Tofino Time

The remote west coast of Vancouver Island is renowned for its verdant rainforests, white sandy beaches, burgeoning marine life, and wild and woolly waves that lure surfers from far and wide, in spite of chilly water that requires a dry suit year-round.

Tofino, the heart of Canadian surf culture, is a town of about 1,650 year-round residents located atop the Esowista peninsula above Pacific Rim National Park. It takes most of a day to get there by car from Vancouver or Victoria: it's a three-plus-hour drive from Nanaimo along winding roads — perhaps longer in the summer when you might have to dawdle behind slow-moving RVs and camper trailers much of the time.

Originally a frontier logging and fishing community, Tofino became a popular destination for hippies and surfers in the 1960s and '70s, and was a flashpoint in the Clayoquot Sound protest clashes between environmentalists and loggers. While the hippie vibe is still pungent in the air, so is the smell of fish guts and fresh-cut timber, as well as espresso-roasted coffee and fresh-brewed craft beer.

The area's ferociously stormy winters led to the town's nickname of "Tough City." That legacy has since evolved into "Tuff," an adjective which adorns many businesses in the village's small downtown area — from Tuff Beans coffee house to Tuff City Sushi and, most recently, *Tuff Session Ale*, the flagship beer from Tofino Brewing, which just opened last summer.

On the Thursday evening in November when I visited the small brewery, I saw first-hand how much the community has already embraced it. Every few minutes someone arrived by car, bike or on foot, empty growlers held aloft and a warm greeting at the ready. The brewery's trio of co-owners — all locals themselves — seemed to know every customer by name. No one was in a rush, but that's not surprising considering the common local philosophy of "living on Tofino time," which roughly translates into "takin' it easy, dude."

The town's tight-knit community is made up of members of the tourism workforce, such as servers, chefs, hotel staff, whale watching tour guides, fishing charter operators and kayak/surf outfitters, as well as people who work in the



L-R Chris Neufeld and Bryan O'Malley, co-owners of Tofino Brewing. PHOTOS BY JOE WIEBE



traditional fishing and logging industries. The common thread among all these different types of people is a certain sense of independence, a love of wilderness sports, and, of course, beer.

While the brewery's owners, Dave McConnell, Chris Neufeld, and Bryan O'Malley, hoped that locals would be interested in the growler concept based on the environmental angle of refilling the same jug over and over again, they were not prepared for just how popular growlers would be. Their first batch of 300, which they thought would last them

a month, sold out just four or five days after opening. An emergency order of 600 more was gone in another week, and they quickly ordered another thousand.

"We had a growler for every man, woman and child in Tofino," quipped brewer Dave Woodward after finishing brewing a batch of *Tuff Session Ale*. Neufeld added that they had to change their business plan, capping keg sales to allow for the unexpected popularity of the growlers, which now account for more than half of their business.

Enticing Woodward to join them from Vancouver was a great decision. Not that he took much persuading—after training in England a decade ago, he spent

five years working for the Whistler Brew House, a brewpub that is part of the Vancouver-area Mark James Group chain, and while he learned a lot there, he was glad to escape that "larger corporate structure" and get involved with a craft brewery from the ground up.

Woodward said he has been "pleasantly surprised how developed the palate for craft beer" is in Tofino, despite its remoteness. He is proud of *Tuff Session Ale*, and deservedly so - it's an appealing west coast pale ale with a complex malt profile and some definite hoppiness.

The brewery further tested the locals' taste for hops with their first seasonal brew last summer, the *Hoppin' Cretin IPA*, and was so gratified by the enthusiastic response that they intend to add it to their line-up full-time in 2012. Other seasonal brews have included *Fogust Wheat Ale* (hefeweizen), *Pumpkin Ale*, and *Dawn Patrol Coffee Porter*, which debuted the night of my visit in November and was a big hit among the customers.

A cask version of the *Hoppin' Cretin IPA*, infused with spruce tips picked in the forests around Tofino, made it over to the Central City Cask Festival last summer, and it was one of the day's best beers. Woodward said he hopes to make an even bigger batch with spruce tips this year, and given their harvest is a springtime event, perhaps this could be the perfect complement to the now trendy fresh-hopped seasonals that come out each fall.

Tofino Brewing also hopes to begin bottling its brews in 2012, which should give them greater access to the thirsty markets of craft beer drinkers in Victoria and Vancouver, as well as local wine-focused restaurants that may not want to put a keg on but would certainly consider offering their bottled brews. As they expand to respond to consumer demand, let's hope they can still stay on Tofino time.

Joe Wiebe writes about BC beers for NWBN.