

Lagers and tankards and brews! Oh, my!

Seven independent Asheville breweries band together, forming an alliance

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Six local breweries formed the Asheville Brewing Alliance to promote Asheville beer and provide information on beer and beer-related events.

"The ABA is all of the microbreweries in the city of Asheville. There will be eight by the end of the summer," said Mike Rangel, media spokesman for the ABA and president of Asheville Pizza & Brewing Company. "We're looking to create more of a name brand market. Asheville is a destination with a lot of beer tourism."

The current members of the ABA are Highland, Green Man, Wedge, French Broad and Craggie. The Lobster Trap Brewery and the Lexington Avenue Brewery will open soon and join the alliance.

There has always been an unofficial alliance between the Asheville breweries, according to Rangel.

"We're like a little country mafia. The idea is that if French Broad Brewery sells somewhere, it's a success for all of us," Rangel said. "We've doubled the numbers in the last two years from four to eight. Four breweries in a town is huge."

According to Rangel, Asheville has the most microbreweries, per capita, of any city in the United States.

"The Asheville breweries have never torn each other down," he said, remembering stories about times when the Highland Brewery let the APBC borrow grain when their shipments were late.

According to Rangel, microbreweries are better than the "Big Guys."

"I definitely feel that there has to be a Budweiser in this world. Luckily for us they make a fairly bland, safe, easily drinkable product, and that's great for a certain percentage of people. But for people that really enjoy beer, the micros can create hundreds of styles and there's a dedication to microbrews as a master craftsman like a great chef. The microbreweries bring that sort of craftsmanship to the table," he said.

Rangel said the alliance allows for more educational and recreational opportunities for Asheville beer lovers.

The ABA plans a yearly competition in which home brewers can compete with the local microbreweries.

"We will elect a liaison from the ABA to work with the home brewers to give out yeast for educational purposes, to pick their brains, that sort of thing. We also want to create an event with the home brewers that once a year the home brewers and the microbreweries all

create the same kind of beer and kind of compete, just for fun, just a general love of beer type of thing," Rangel said.

UNC Asheville students, home brewers and roommates Kyle Romeo and Jonah Freedman are excited about the chance to pit their beer against local professionals.

"The microbrewers would have something to worry about. The home brewer has a serious advantage because his beer is his craft. He doesn't do it for money. We brew it to drink it, and there is nothing better than a beer that was brewed just for you," Freedman said.

The roommates plan to become involved with the ABA.

"We're all brewing beer for our own enjoyment and appreciation of good taste. So why not enter a competition?" Romeo said. "It would just be for fun, and it would be a great way to get home brewers together to talk about beer, and maybe lead to the formation of new microbreweries."

Romeo and Freedman hope that the beer of choice was an oatmeal porter they brewed last month because, out of the ten beers that they've brewed in the last year, they both agree the oatmeal porter is their best.

"The oatmeal porter was the most delicious porter I have ever had. I am usually not a fan of dark beers, but this porter had just the right balance of sweetness to the hoppy flavor. That burst of sweetness after the first swig was ecstasy. That defines a porter. It's funny because the brew was left in the carboy for way too long, but perhaps it is the imperfections in a beer that make the taste appealing," Freedman said.

The short-term goal of the ABA is to create an interactive and user-friendly Web site and to create a process that will break down the barriers between home brewers, microbreweries and beer lovers, according to Rangel.

"They're two sides of it from a microbrewery perspective, to keep the communication, the friendship and camaraderie between the breweries alive," Rangel said.

According to Rangel, the ABA is a place where once a month the microbreweries can get together and share information.

"We're a baby organization," Rangel said. "The feedback we have received from media, other businesses and other beer alliances has been very positive. A lot of it is 'it's about time,' he said.

Rangel said he hopes to see Asheville become a beer mecca.

"We have Bruisin' Ales, the beer store downtown that was voted one of the top five beer places in the world. We have Tony Kiss, the beer guy; Asheville actually has a beer columnist. It's very much ahead of the curve as far as beer towns go."

