

Adventures in Brewing with Captain Lawrence and 5 Napkin Burger

BY JUSTINE STERLING | POSTED FEBRUARY 20, 2014



Restaurant industry folk are rarely bright-eyed and chipper at seven in the morning. But the delegation sent from 5 Napkin Burger's three New York City locations was raring to go a couple of weeks ago when they met at Grand Central Station. That's because beer was involved. The team was heading out to Captain Lawrence Brewing in White Plains to work on a signature brew.

The mini restaurant chain and the brewery have had a relationship since Captain Lawrence's beginnings in 2006, so it was only natural that the two New York businesses join up to produce a burger-friendly beer. Before heading out the brewery, the staff voted on a type of beer: brown ale, amber ale or IPA. The overwhelming winner was amber ale. But rather than make a tried and true (but seen before) amber, the Captain Lawrence guys thought to add Kölsch yeast, a German yeast that adds a food-friendly maltiness to the brew. "It will be approachable but not boring," owner and head brewer Scott Vaccaro said. At least, that's what they hoped would happen. The recipe was never tested before this.

Brewing without a net is not an unheard of practice at Captain Lawrence. Their pilot brewer, a small system that holds just seven barrels worth of beer, is the brewers' outlet for creativity. Nearly everyone working at the brewery has used the system to produce an original recipe and some of them, like the black IPA, have made it to the main stage. But if the brew isn't successful, the beer doesn't just go to waste. "If it doesn't work, I make the brewers drink it," says Vaccaro.

At the brewery, the 5 Napkin group loaded the malts (nutty, caramelly Crystal malt plus Vienna malt for a slightly toasty touch) into the brewer, then took a break for beers in the tasting room. It was barely 11 a.m. but the staff excitedly tasted through the brewery's limited edition session IPA and chocolate-cherry porter while noshing on a giant muffaletta made with meats cured by chef Richie Biondo of the Hell's Kitchen location. Each staff member was chosen to go on this field trip for his or her enthusiasm for beer—one member was even studying for the second level of the Cicerone Certification Program. After another hour or so, it was time to add the hops—Californian for a citrusy hit. Then, back to the beers and a marathon game of corn hole. As Scott Tobin, the brew house manager, said, "Brewing is a lot of cleaning and a lot of waiting."

The beer, called the 5 Napkin Crew Brew, will be available in the spring on tap at 5 Napkin Burgers' three New York locations (Hell's Kitchen, Union Square and the Upper West Side), as well as at Captain Lawrence's tasting room.