Hood River News

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SCOTCH

Big Horse still kickin'



BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Server Sarah Veilleux displays the full flight of what's on tap; server Cody Cornett samples the ales from the panoramic north deck; owner Randy Orzeck brews beer, c. 1994; current brewer Derrak Smith at work last week; Susan and Randy Orzeck and their new chef, Jeff Croke.











Hood River's oldest brew pub turns 25

BLONDE

By KIRBY NEUMANN-REA

News editor

A certain vigor was always needed to run a threestorv restaurant.

A new energy fills Horsefeathers and Big Horse Brewing as the downtown anchor restaurant celebrates its 25th year, and as original owners Randy and Susan Orzeck embark on a new identity - gastro pub — for the restaurant, also home to the original Hood River microbrewery, Big Horse.

The Orzecks hired a new chef, Jeff Croke, created a new menu, and are hoping for a fresh vibe for the picturesque establishment that looks out over Oak and Second Street.

'Gastro pub is fine dining-style food at more of a pub price and with a pub atmosphere," said Randy.

Was the quarter-century anniversary the cause for doing something new?

'Yes, absolutely," Susan said. "The motivation of getting a new chef was definitely a motivation — it was like, 'Hey, 25 years, let's do something differ-

"We plan a year-long party for our 25th year," Susan said, starting with the special beer release events this spring featuring the in-house ales of brewmaster Derrak Smith, who started a little over a year ago. (See adjoining article for more on Smith.)

From its beginning in April 1988, through the lean first few years, it took energy for the Orzecks to keep the operation on its feet.

The food scene in Hood River in 1988 was not like it is today, and Randy Orzeck was setting out to create a fine dining establishment that would first be known as Horsefeathers Fine Dining and Spirits.

Randy was sales manager for a couple of large windsurfing companies, and first he came to Hood River on a windsurfing sales trip in 1981. He bought a house on the bluff for \$70,000, splitting time between here and Connecticut.

"I went home for a year, gave the company a year's notice, told them to either allow me to work out here or I'm out. I just fell in love with it.'

Horsefeathers Fine Food and Spirits ran for about eight years as a restaurant complete with carrots cut into the shape of roses, set around fancy dishes such

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Young buck settles in as brewer

By KIRBY NEUMANN-REA News editor

Derrak Smith is the youngest brewer in any of the county's five commercial breweries, and he works in the oldest, and smallest, ale house.

Smith's story is a unique one, even in the diverse

field of ale authors in our midst. He works alone in a four-barrel system that expanded to six tanks last year from the original four

installed by his boss, Randy Orzeck, who was the first Big Horse brewer.

In a brewing tradition seen all over Europe, he is handcrafting beers one floor below the pub where it is served. Big Horse has this in common with Full Sail and Solera, where pub areas also are located di-

rectly above the tanks. What follows is an abridged profile and interview with Smith. For the full interview, go to hoodrivernews.com

Smith is 27, and he has a son, Jude, 4. His history at Horsefeathers goes back to when he was too young to hang out in any bar. At 16 he and friends used to sneak into the lower level of the restaurant

At age 18, he left Hood River and lived a year in the New York City area, doing volunteer work for a religious organization he from which he — and some of his immediate family — have since severed any ties.

He lived in Hood River a while, and then moved to Portland when he was 20.

"That's where I got introduced to beer. I didn't think I'd like beer," Smith said. "People would say 'Let's grab a beer,' and I would say, 'I don't like beer. Beer is crap."

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DERRAK SMITH used to sneak into Horsefeathers at age 16 to play pool. Eleven years later, he works one floor below, as the Big Horse brewer.

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as rack of lamb.

"We showed up in town and — I was just looking at our original menus — we were more expensive with a lot of items than we are now," Randy said. There wasn't much else in terms of fine dining in Hood River, a town that by the 2000s would emerge as a culinary and wine destination.

"Then Pasquale's opened (where Cornerstone Cuisine is now), and Chianti's where Sixth Street is now and several other restaurants were competing for what I would call more upper clientele, so I said, 'Okay, instead of competing and being the fanciest, and splitting the business, let's be a pub." Enter Big Horse, with Orzeck teaching himself to brew beer.

"We are the oldest, and smallest, brew pub in Hood

What's with the name?

Choosing the restaurant name back in 1988 was a spur-of-the-moment idea.

Randy Orzeck was set to open for business and the OLCC told him he had to choose a name for his new restaurant. He did not have one in mind.

Without a name, I couldn't put in an application, and being from the East Coast, I thought, 'Horsefeathers,'" an expression of exasperation that stands in for a less-polite phrase. "So I thought, 'Horsefeathers' — bam — pretty simple."

River," Susan noted.

The Orzecks were married that year, 1994.

"I gave her this place as a wedding gift," he jokes. Susan was asked if she

knew what she was in for. "I don't think I quite did. I

had been in real estate and conference sales prior. I

think I learned everything the hard way.'

'She did learn everything the hard way," Randy said. With the change to pub

style, "we had an amazing number of angry people," recalls Randy.

"You take away fine dining and change, and people didn't embrace it," Susan added. "A lot of people said they'd

never come back and probably haven't," Randy said.

There's a regular flow of people into the restaurant and brewery these days, but Randy Orzeck well remembers when it was not that way.

For the self-effacing Randy, hanging on with the same restaurant for 25 years 'shows incredible stupidity."

"I can remember many a night standing at that (north) window, waiting for a car to come off that exit into Hood River and sitting here waiting to see if they would actually come through the blinking red light, and seeing if they would turn and

see if they would park, and thinking, 'Please, dear God, come to my restaurant."

This was about the time the wind sports industry was truly taking hold in Hood River.

How many people remember the time, not so long ago, when restaurants would close for the winter? The Orzecks weathered those years. In about 1995, they decided for the first time not to close for the winter, but even then Horsefeathers was not always open seven days a week.

The shift from fine dining to pub fare to mid-range menu prices now goes to "gastro pub" for Horsefeathers, probably the first place in town to designate itself that way.

Last year they met Jeff Croke, formerly head chef at

sous chef at highly regarded but since closed Abruzzo, who worked at a country club on the east coast and re-Horsefeathers six months ago, introducing a new menu that adjusts to seasons and food availability about once a

"Our goal was, once again, to differentiate ourselves, since the town is littered with pubs — to be an upscale dining pub."

Said the French-classically trained Croke, "I'm back to my roots, and just cooking food that makes me feel good, that's seasonal, and doing some fun things, instead of getting overly complicated; just keeping it fun and bright.'

The Orzecks are contemplating the next era for the right road."

Columbia Gorge Hotel and Horsefeathers, possibly to include a second kitchen and taco and tapas bar on the middle level.

"We can't expand the turned to Hood River and restaurant; the only thing we would expand is the kitchen," Randy said. "We have some idea of perhaps a different restaurant on the middle floor, which would have its own kitchen. It

would very small," he said. 'It's an odd layout. The pool room is kind of an unusual space. There are a lot of complications with running a restaurant with two floors, and the kitchen is only so big, so that's a limitation.'

Any such change would be 'a year or two out," Randy said. "We were waiting for the right chef to show up and it's a matter of going down

BREW

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But gradually that changed, and he acquired a

"I started getting into beer more after I started brewing," he said.

He spent five and a half years actively home brewing, before his Big Horse predecessor, Jason Kahler, handpicked him in late 2011.

HRN: How did you get your start as a brewer?

"I was with a friend, having beer, and he said, 'We

should try making beer. "I said, 'I didn't know you could make beer.' You go to a restaurant and you like a dish and you think, 'I could make that at home,' but I didn't think about that with beer.

Next, an ex-girlfriend got him a home beer kit.

"The girl is out of the picture," he said. "My ex led me to drink and I never had time

to thank her for it. It's a joke mation." but there is some truth to it.

very successful. I didn't know where to get my information. I'd go online and get all contradictory information. Once I learned where to get my information that turned it around.

"My first good batch was my first, and my second batch was really good, the one after that — and the next 50 were no good.

"That's relating it to my standards now. I guess at the time they were all right.

"I knew once vou do one correctly, even if there's a whole bunch of bad ones I knew I could do it correctly. It just takes a lot of time and studying, and trial and error.'

How many trials?

"Past 50. I mean there was even a point when I was brewing, had a batch that wasn't taking that great. I wasn't sure I wanted to continue it as a hobby, and that's when I found the right infor-

So was there a particu-"The first year was not lar source? Or did you know the right places to

look? "First, I went to local Homebrewers of the Gorge, a great source because a few of them have been doing it for 15 years, have great palates, and can tell you what went wrong and how to change it.

"I started hitting all the brewers around here, including Jason (Kahler, his Big Horse predecessor), and then started looking to Jameel Zaneischef, an award-winning brewer, and books on brewing and microbiology and yeast. I didn't understand it right away, but I would bring (beers and ideas) to the (homebrew) group, and get feedback. I did that every single week.

"About three years ago I started making good beer, or even a couple of years ago, didn't know why it wasn't, consistently making good beer, and about two and a half ago I really started nailing it down."



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