



# BEEROCRACY

## FLYING BIKE COOPERATIVE BREWERY IS BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

Words by Kendall Jones | Photos by Will Foster

When I first heard about the not-yet-realized vision of Flying Bike Cooperative Brewery, I was cynical. It seemed nothing more than an exercise in creative financing, just another scheme to start a brewery using other people's money. Almost instantly, some 300 people joined the co-op, exerting their will as owners, influencing the brewery's direction and proving me wrong.

In most respects, the taproom looks much like any other brewery in Seattle—busy on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons with people sipping IPAs and other tasty beers—but behind the scenes, Flying Bike Cooperative Brewery is much different.

From its inception in 2011, it would take four years for Flying Bike to earn its wings. There were a lot of member meetings and many impassioned discussions. Most people had never heard of a co-op brewery, and nobody had ever opened one in Washington, so there were some regulatory and logistical issues to navigate. In truth, nobody was sure if the idea would actually fly.

"We came up with the brewery's name as a folly, really," says David Wiegand, who currently serves on Flying Bike's board of directors. "Back

in the early days, it was a joke—a cooperatively owned brewery was about as likely as a bike that could fly."

It wasn't quick or easy, but by 2015 the co-op had grown to more than 1,500 members, secured a location for the brewery and taproom in Seattle's Greenwood neighborhood, and employed the services of an experienced, professional brewer. The brewery's taproom opened in August of that year and has been serving beer to co-op members and the public ever since.

So how does it work? Flying Bike is incorporated under the Washington State Nonprofit Miscellaneous and Mutual Corporation Act, with co-op membership open to any Washington resident. A lifetime membership costs \$200, which purchases one voting share. It is a one-time purchase, with no recurring fees.

Flying Bike's Head Brewer Kevin Forhan and former Assistant Brewer Scott Jensen take on the ever-so-tough task of sampling brews in the making.

A business built by the community will be supported by the community—that's the idea behind Flying Bike. Being in the business of beer certainly helps, too.



Members get perks, like discounts on beer at the taproom, access to member-only events and more. The member-owners elect a board of directors to manage day-to-day operations, and they also have opportunities to weigh in on business decisions.

Today, Flying Bike beer is primarily available at the brewery, with some beer wholesaled to local bars and pubs, and a few selections appearing at beer festivals in western Washington. The taproom is open to the public, helping to sustain the business and fund the vision of the more than 2,000 member-owners.

Flying Bike's offerings are a combination of member-conceived recipes and those devised by Kevin Forhan, the head brewer hired by the co-op in 2015. "I have full freedom to 'play' and do my own thing," Forhan says. "Then I get to work with these co-op member homebrew competition winners in growing up their recipes to our full seven-barrel [217-gallon] system. That's an endlessly interesting chal-

lenge... These homebrewers, they're not messing around. I learn three new things every day."

The co-op regularly hosts homebrew competitions for members to submit their best creations. Member-owners act as judges, with winning beers adapted for, and brewed on, the big system.

"It is very exciting for me to see one or two of my beers on tap there," says Eric Blume, longtime homebrewer and Flying Bike member number 905. "My biggest thrill was in 2018 when my porter that was pouring at Flying Bike went on to win the gold medal at the Washington Beer Awards. Just to think, my porter was better than all the commercial brewery offerings in the state that year!"

That pride of ownership is at the heart of Flying Bike. When you visit the taproom, know that the co-op members built the place on their own. Not just with their hard-earned dollars and elbow grease, but also with their passion for beer. ▲



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