

A new meaning for B&B

By Stephanie Citron



Any craft-beer devotee will tell you the hardest thing about visiting a craft brewery is getting up to leave. Delaware’s Dogfish Head Craft Brewery is encouraging more people to stay by going beyond the welcome mat to the spare bedroom — or 16.

Having gained a following for its beers, Dogfish Head captured the attention of foodies by integrating flavorful ingredients into its brews. Now it is breaking new ground this summer by opening the Dogfish Inn, a brewery-themed boutique hotel, to accommodate its perpetual influx of craft-brew heads.

If you are envisioning staggering post-collegiate broh-types flipping quarters off balconies, think again.

Dogfish Head founder Sam Calagione says that folks who are passionate and selective about their beverages are also intrepid travelers seeking experiences that define the region where the beers are made.

To test that theory about two years ago, he opened a brewery-themed room at the Inn at Town Square in Lewes, Del, called the Brew Master’s Suite. He filled it with Dogfish Head paraphernalia and books on brewing, but focused on providing packages that included activities and diversions unique to the region. After an overwhelming response, he quickly realized the limitations of being able to offer just one room to his burgeoning community of enthusiasts.

Last year, Calagione learned that the old Vesuvio Motel in Lewes was for sale. If you believe in fateful signs, the property sits alongside a tiny bridge spanning a canal that is chock full of dogfish. More importantly, it was perfectly positioned within walking distance of the beach, the hiking and biking trails of Cape Henlopen State Park and Lewes’ restaurants that sell Dogfish Head beer.

“It married the concept of everything we were trying to achieve,” Calagione said.

The new Dogfish Inn has been retrofitted into the old 16-room motel, carefully preserving the nostalgic seaside facade while completely renovating the interior. Its operating doctrine is to translate the brewery’s “off-centered living” philosophy, but everything about the refurbished place says “Cheers.”

While some hotel lobbies might burn spa candles for ambience, the Dogfish Inn’s check-in cottage is fragranced with tantalizing chicory coffee blended with dark malted brewers’ barley. The dog-friendly guest rooms, which offer either a king-size bed or two queens, are stocked with hoppy amenities like Dogfish Head Beer Soap crafted with their 60 Minute IPA, signature glassware, wall-mounted bottle openers and treasure maps designating the brewery’s recommended destinations that are accessible on foot and by bike, paddleboard or kayak. However, the in-room refrigerators are not stocked with beer; instead, the idea is to support the local retailers and restaurants that sell it.

“It may seem counterintuitive to create a brewery hotel that doesn’t sell beer,” said Calagione, but being firmly entrenched in the Delaware coastal community, he opted not to lobby for licensing to build an on-premises restaurant or pub.

“This is three blocks from my house. The restaurants here in town all serve Dogfish Head beer. I’d rather direct our guests to them, and in that way, everybody wins,” he said. “And since the rooms are set up for beer lovers, all you need to do is bring the beer.” Hanging on the wall in each room is a burlap-like “Marketbag” custom-designed to carry Dogfish Head’s 750ml bottles and six-packs back to your room.

The room interiors feature custom-designed minimalist furnishings and accoutrements, created primarily by American craftsmen, who incorporated the nostalgic beachy bleached-wood colors of yesteryear. Down feather pillows and duvet covers were fabricated by Lewes-based Midwest Feather and Down. The green wool throw blankets at the bottom of each bed are by Woolrich, the company that makes the brewery’s signature clothing line.

Each room displays an original oil painting of Lewes’ national historic landmark, Lightship Overfalls, by Delaware artist Steve Rogers, as well as signed posters of album covers of music created for the various beer launches. All of the artwork is custom-framed with salvaged wood from local farms by organic farmer Matt Myers.

There are no in-room phones, but there is free Wi-Fi and television.

“I lost that battle to my wife,” said Calagione, “She convinced me that sometimes people will want to veg out for an hour in front of the TV after a long day.”

On the second floor of the check-in cottage is the hotel’s only two-bedroom suite. At double the price of the other rooms, it offers more amenities, including a sitting area and kitchenette. It is accessible by a private exterior door marked “Sweet!”

From the front desk, guests can borrow bikes and paddleboards to explore the coast, neighboring towns and Dogfish Head Brewings & Eats in nearby Rehoboth Beach. An honor-system library is stocked with cerebral beach reads — many nautically themed — from San Francisco’s City Lights Books, whose owner attended high school with Calagione.

In yet another off-center strategy, rather than hire an innkeeper with hotel experience, Calagione promoted a brewery worker to the job.

“Our success has always been based upon not listening to the traditional way of doing things, so I felt like it was more important to hire someone who understands our culture rather than risk our inn feeling like other hotels,” Calagione said.

Andrew Greeley, who has worked in various capacities for the brewery, including tour guide and running the tasting room, is now in charge of the inn. Before working at Dogfish Head, he was a teacher and admissions director at a private school near Annapolis.

“Dogfish Head is more than just a brewery, and the Dogfish Inn will be more than just a hotel,” Greeley said.

In the weeks leading up to its July opening, a steady stream of would-be guests wandered up to the door of the inn, hoping to get a room. Greeley and Calagione view that as the promise of regular walk-in business.

Couple that with the fact that Dogfish Head Craft Brewery, now the 13th-largest craft brewery in the U.S. according to the Brewers Association, receives nearly 1,000 visitors a week to their brewery and brewpub, with about half coming from out of state.

You don’t need to be a math whiz to recognize that only a small percentage will have a chance to stay at the hotel. But, who knows? In that typical Dogfish Head mode, perhaps there is an “off-centered” Brewery Resort in their future.

But you can bet that you’ll still have to BYOB.

If you go

The Dogfish Inn, 105 Savannah Road, Lewes, Del., 302-644-8292, dogfishinn.com. Rates vary seasonally and on holidays. Summer weekend rates average \$280 per night with a two-night minimum on Friday and Saturday. Weekday rates begin at \$250. The Cottage Sweet (suite) is \$595 per night.

Beer on the beach

Love craft beer? Here are the region’s best Brew Fests along the Mid-Atlantic shore this summer and into the autumn, where you can sample all the goods.

Eastern Shore’s Own Arts Center Craft Beer & Music Festival, ESO Arts Center, 15239 King Street, Belle Haven, Va. Featuring more than 30 regional microbrews and local food vendors. Entertainment by Bird Dog & the Road Kings of Trappe, with opening act Win Winslow (Aug. 9).

Cape May’s Annual Craft Beer & Crab Festival, Physick Estate, 1048 Washington St., Cape May, N.J., 609-884-5404. About a dozen cutting-edge craft breweries, steamed crabs and local bands (Aug. 9).

Brews by the Bay at the ferry dock in Cape May and Lewes. Two festivals in one day, connected by ferry boat and featuring more than 20 regional craft breweries (Sept. 6).

Golden Nugget Atlantic City Craft Beer Fest, 1 Castle Blvd., Atlantic City, N.J. 609-441-2000, goldennugget.com. A half-dozen beer events in two days. The main event takes place Saturday night with a tasting of 99 seasonal craft beers in the Grand Ballroom. Friday and Saturday also offer beer-pairing dinners (Sept. 26-27).

Good Beer Festival, Pemberton Historical Park, 5561 Plantation Lane, Salisbury, goodbeerfestival.org. Featuring more than 125 craft beers and a home-brew competition. Attendees receive a 3-ounce tasting glass for samples. Also features live entertainment, local food vendors and crafts fair (Oct. 11-12).

Virginia Beach Craft Beer Festival, 24th Street Park on the Boardwalk, Virginia Beach, beachstreetusa.com/festivals. More than 20 craft breweries, local food and entertainment (Oct. 18-19).