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On Tap: ASU hopes to sell its craft beer

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Published: December 11, 2010

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Appalachian State University trustees voted unanimously yesterday to pursue state and federal permits to establish a brewery that would allow the university to sell beer made by professors and students in brewery classes.

Ivory Tower Brewery, in the basement of the Broyhill Inn and Conference Center, is a small nonprofit brewery operated by university professors who taught an honors class in beer brewing to 12 students last spring.

The class covered the chemical, biological and production process of brewing malted beverages, including the science of how to combine hops, malt and yeast to produce styles and flavors of beer.

Since that beer was used for research and educational purposes by a university, it was legal. But selling beer is another matter.

"The university is authorized to sell products that are incidental to instructional and laboratory work already," said Dayton Cole, ASU's attorney. "But because alcoholic beverages are so heavily regulated, we need to get permits."

Getting state and federal permits is part of a process that could mean that beer produced by ASU classes would be sold at the Broyhill Inn and Conference Center as early as next summer, once the permits are in place.

It's also a step in a continuing effort by the university to offer more classes in wine- and beer-making, and, eventually, start a four-year degree program in fermentation sciences.

Brett Taubman, an assistant professor of chemistry, and Shea Tuberty, an associate professor of biology, operate Ivory Tower Brewery and taught last spring's class, "The Science, History and Business of Beer and Brewing."

"With the production

license, it's sort of untrodden territory," Taubman said. "By getting the permitting, we'll be absolutely compliant under the eyes of the state and ABC. If we want to take it to the next level and sell the product, that's great because it makes it a self-sustaining program."

Money from sales of the beer could be put back into buying supplies and equipment.

Taubman is an analytical chemist. His specialty is studying how aerosols affect the atmosphere, but he's also a self-described "obsessive brewer" who saw beer brewing as a way to interest students in science.

"There's such great science in brewing," he said. "I wanted to use it as an academic tool, and it's kind of grown from there."

There's also an economic vision to the enterprise — training workers for what is a growing business.

North Carolina has about 50 craft breweries, more than any other state in the South. Asheville, with some 50 local varieties of brews offered by nine craft breweries, is considered one of the top craft-beer cities in the nation.

"It's really increased the tourism in that city," Taubman said. "That's what we see for the High Country as well."

The university is aware that students often abuse beer, Taubman said. He said they are trying to deal with those problems.

"We're trying to educate students about the entire process and to appreciate beer and the good beer so they won't abuse the product," he said.

As ASU continues developing its fermentation-sciences degree, one possibility being discussed is to team up with Surry Community College. Students would be able to study two years in the viticulture program there, then spend two years at ASU to receive a bachelor's degree.

Surry Community College produces wine through its bonded winery and sells it in grocery stores and at festivals under the label Surry Cellars. Selling bottled beer produced by ASU is not on the immediate horizon, although it's something the university could consider once it has brewery permits.

Jamie Bartholomaeus, the brewmaster at Winston-Salem's Foothills Brewing, taught a session in last spring's program at ASU, giving students a basic overview of opening a brewery. He says that it's one thing to teach people how to homebrew beer, but it would be a long process and big investment in staffing and facilities to compete with brewing schools.

Still, Bartholomaeus said, jobs are available for people with a four-year degree in fermentation sciences.

"Breweries and craft beers are a booming business right now," he said.

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