



hog in the limelight

When it comes to championing the successes of the Feral Brewing Company, results seem to speak louder than the humble words of their head brewer. **Anthony Williams** speaks with brewer Brendan Varis.

SINCE OPENING its doors in 2003, Feral has become the quiet achiever of WA craft-brewing, doing things its own way, in its own corner of the Swan Valley, and establishing a reputation for flavour-driven, often adventurous beers of uncompromising quality.

Brendan Varis and fellow brewer Will Irving have simply let their beers do the talking, and industry recognition has followed.

At this year's Australian International Beer Awards, the brewery collected five of the 15 major trophies on offer; including the highly coveted Champion Exhibitor and Champion Small Brewery gongs. In a competition that featured 1140 entries from 215 breweries, representing 39 countries, Feral accumulated the highest overall score from judges – with seven entered brews – and received trophies for its 'White' – Champion Hybrid Beer,

'Hop Hog' – Champion Ale and 'Razorback' – Champion Scotch & Barley Wine beers. Indeed, when the awards were announced at Melbourne's Crown Palladium on 19 March, it seemed that Brendan and Will had arrived at a career-defining peak; yet, months later, Feral's head brewer is rather more circumspect about the significance of all those trophies and medals.

"When we work out a beer that we're going to make, on a clean sheet of paper, we don't have in our minds, 'right, let's make an award-winning beer'," begins Brendan.

"We make beer that we like to drink first and foremost, and if we're fortunate enough that [the beer] we like to drink is considered to be worthy of a medal, or award, by a judging panel then that's great.

"We're grateful to get a bit of acknowledgement from our peers, but it's a secondary thing. It does make you feel nice and fluffy, don't get me wrong!"

Perhaps Brendan would agree with the notion that a craft-brewer's greatest success should be found in the glass, rather than in the glass cabinet. His passion for the world beyond mass-produced lager was sparked during a visit to America's west coast in the early 90s, where the proliferation of craft-breweries "in a country renowned for having the blandest beer in the world" came as a surprise.

Long-distance studies with the UK-based Institute and Guild of Brewing followed that trip, and so began a learning process that has included working with Roger Bussell - who Varis describes as "a mentor, or godfather, for the industry" - and judging competitions around the world.

"I learnt a lot when I was judging at the World Beer Cup last year," explains Varis, recalling his experience at the world's largest beer competition.

"The sheer number of beers you get to look at in a short space of time lets you set up a little filing cabinet in your mind - as to the how, what, when and why of making beer. Also, you're meeting other very, very competent people and getting to talk, discuss, assess and analyse beer with them.

"Judging at the World Beer Cup probably helped me lift our beers to another level."

Raising standards was also Brendan's goal when he took on the role of chief judge at this year's Cryer Malt Perth Royal Beer Show, held in June. After two judging stints at the now three year old event, he saw an opportunity to incorporate his experience of overseas beer competitions and improve on what had already been established locally. But while the chief judge role gave Brendan the chance

to make some changes to the judging process, it also prompted the decision not to enter Feral's beers this year; a decision he made "for the integrity of the competition", and an absence he doesn't think made the results any less meaningful.

"On any given day, in a 20-horse race, any horse can win," Brendan states.

Racing or not, Feral's stable of craft-brewed thoroughbreds has been undergoing serious expansion in recent times. Brendan and Will have been busily stockpiling a selection of new brews for their in-house, on-tap range, with the venue's five permanent beers - the White, Pils, Hop Hog, Rust and Farmhouse Ale - set to be joined by a constantly changing smorgasbord of between five and nine additional offerings.

Amongst the first of these new arrivals is a Smoked Porter, an Imperial IPA, an English Bitter (called 'Feral Cow') and a low-alcohol Belgian table beer. Brendan is confident, or at least hopeful, it won't result in double the work for Irving and himself.

"Just because we put twice as many beers on-tap, doesn't mean we're going to sell twice as much beer," he says. "We figure we'll sell a bit less of some of our slower brands and a little bit of these new brands.

"But if we sold 15 per cent more beer I'd be happy, and we can manage that ... just!"

Also being managed at the brewery is a longer-term project that involves 10,000 litres of beer, old shiraz barrels and plenty of patience. As Brendan explains, some of that beer has already "been fermented out and is maturing away [in barrels] ... just picking up a bit of character from the wine, and from the oak."

Meanwhile the rest - also in barrels - is slowly turning sour and developing "barnyard, farmhouse, horse-blanket and dirty socks [type] characters."

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Meanwhile the rest is slowly turning sour and developing “barnyard, farmhouse, horse-blanket and dirty socks [type] characters.”

That’s not unusual. For Feral brewers and other fans of Belgium’s utterly unique Lambic beer style, these are highly desirable characters. In the Senne Valley, not far from Brussels, brewers utilise airborne wild yeasts and bacteria to spontaneously ferment their traditionally sour, vinous and funky (read: challenging) lambic brews.

In the Swan Valley, Varis has had to buy and culture the *brettanomyces*, *lactobacillus* and *pediococcus* strains he’s using in this typically adventurous, two-year attempt to create beers with those same qualities.

“We may end up tipping it all down the drain, who knows,” Varis admits. “But if we do happen to hit on something, and manage to do it well, it’s not something that many

people are going to be able to just pick up and do tomorrow.

“They’re going to have to start thinking a couple of years ahead and commit a fair bit of resource to it, and be really committed to why they do it.

“Otherwise, it’s something we’ll have to ourselves.”

The first of those beers won’t be ready until April next year, but it’s that willingness to get informed and go where other brewers fear to tread that puts Feral ahead of WA’s – if not Australia’s – craft-brewing pack. When Brendan talks about future plans for a hand-pump and cask-conditioned ‘Real Ale’, and for limited runs of Feral’s biggest beers in 750ml bottles, you just know that the results will speak for themselves.

“It’s [all] part of us also being really clear about the fact that we’re a craft-brewery, and we don’t want to get bogged down in making just one type of beer,” he says.

“We’re here to offer new and interesting stuff all the time, and [doing that] is one way of sticking to why we do what we do.”

TASTING NOTES:

Feral Fave’s and New Finds

Feral White (4.6% abv)

This traditional, Belgian-style witbier (wheat/white beer) beat Hoegaarden White at its own game at the 2007 Australian International Beer Awards, before picking up a champion trophy in this year’s competition. Feral’s White pours a cloudy lemon-yellow with a foamy white head, offering citrus and spice on the nose and adding zesty lemon, creamy wheat, vanilla and banana notes on the palate. The finish is crisp and slightly tart, with a healthy carbonation also contributing to the beer’s wonderfully refreshing character.

Razorback Barley Wine (12.5% abv)

This Feral beast pours a lovely ruby-amber and offers little indication of its potency throughout. There are toffee, vinous and sherry aromatics on the nose and rich toffee and dried fruit characters on the palate; yet there’s also a beautiful sense of balance and elegant drinkability that’s rarely found in beers of this strength. With champagne yeast involved and gilt-edged foam in the glass, Razorback is in a class of its own.

Smoked Porter (4.7% abv)

Putting a twist on the classic Porter style, brewers Brendan Varis and Will Irving have added a 30 percent blend of Schlenkerla smoked malt, from Germany, to the beer’s traditional, English Maris Otter malt base. The result is a beer that pours an elegant copper-mahogany colour, with a creamy, beige head, and combines trademark chocolate, caramel and biscuit characters with subtle, but distinctive, hints of campfire and smoked meats. Deliciously drinkable.

Imperial IPA [India Pale Ale] (8.5% abv)

Brendan Varis describes this new brew as “a steroid-amped Hop Hog”; with its seriously buffed, blood-orange hue offering a seductive warning of what is a 20 per cent increase in hops, bitterness and alcohol. Fans of the Hog will know what to expect; intense pine, orange and grapefruit aromatics, with a serious punch of citrus hop character – expressed here in a more robust, resinous form – and a dry, bitter finish on the palate. One for the serious hop-heads. ✨

