



bootleg brewery

An oasis of beer in a desert of wine. That was the bold if cheeky promise made by Bootleg Brewery when owner Tom Reynolds opened the venue's doors in November 1994. **Anthony Williams** speaks with their brewer, Michael Brookes.

ONLY THE MOONSHINE Brewery – which closed in 1993 after operating for three years – can stake an earlier micro-brewing claim in the Margaret River region, and there's little doubt that Bootleg's long-term success has been hugely important to the area's development as a West Australian craft-beer destination.

Indeed, two of Bootleg's signature beers – Wils Pils (a Czech-style pilsner) and Raging Bull dark ale – have been winning awards and attracting nationwide attention since the late 90s. Gary Beale was head brewer back then, but it's Michael Brookes who's been the custodian of the Bootleg beers for the past ten years. He joined the business as a home-brewing bartender in 1998, before assisting, learning from and – 18 months later – replacing the departed Beale in the brewhouse. He's seemingly unaffected by the itchy feet many brewers experience, and in conversation his enthusiasm for Bootleg and the Margaret River region is obvious.

"My lifestyle fits in around here," offers Brookes, when asked about his long-term tenure at the brewery. "I play cricket in summer and race mountain bikes in winter, so outside of work I have passions, which is important to staying in one area and growing with it.

"I [also] have a license, as such, to produce my seasonal beers and to develop the beers, and improve them all the time," he adds. "That certainly helps – not being overseen by a massive corporate group, where, as the management changes, the ideas change."

Of course, factors causing problematic change in craft beer can come from both

inside and outside the brewhouse. Variability between batches of the same beer is often regarded as a part of craft-brewing's charm, but, for this writer, the Bootleg drinking experience has occasionally disappointed in years past. Brookes takes the observation in his stride, thankfully, pointing to older issues that may have challenged the quality of his brews – and the more recent steps he's taken to improve their consistency.

"In ten years, I've watched [bar and bottleshop] managers try to sell beers we knew wouldn't move in certain areas, with no marketing, and that can flow on to the customer in a negative way, [especially] if it's stored in warehouses under incorrect conditions," he explains. "Choosing the right customers to on-sell your beer is really important – fresh and refrigerated is the way we want to go.

"We also changed our bottling plant three years ago, so we're finding that the longevity and the stability of the product is better," Brookes continues.

"We match up the brews [going] through the taps to what's been packaged, so the customer is definitely getting something consistent. If they drink it here and then take it home, it's the same batch that's in the bottle."

This writer is pleased to report that a fresh, consistent, quality beer product is certainly what's being produced at Bootleg these days. According to Brookes, the specifications for the brewery's six core beers have remained largely unchanged for the past couple of years, with the Settler's Pale evolving into a



mouth-puckering, hop-driven, American-style pale ale from its more modest beginnings. The aforementioned Raging Bull dark ale picked up its fourth gold medal at this year's Australian International Beer Awards and is reliably excellent, while Wils Pils – which combines the quality of imported noble hops and soft, Margaret River rainwater – remains one of Australian craft-brewing's finest pilsners.

"To fit into the style guidelines and call it a 'pilsner' is really important," says Brookes. "You can end up with an American-style, Bohemian or European Pilsner; but to fit it right into the Czech-style, as we market it, there's a very small [range in which] to get the spices and the bitterness right.

"We get Europeans coming in here and they're very proud of that style of beer," he



adds, "and they can be insulted if someone takes it onboard and it's not [true] to style."

At the time of writing, Bootleg's seasonal brew was an impressive Oatmeal Stout, but Brookes was perhaps more excited about the relatively new beer style he plans to tackle next. Visits to the United States and Canada in recent years led him to discover the IBA, or India Black Ale - a beer that adds dark and roasted malt character to the robust, hop-packed strength of the India Pale Ale style, and a seasonal that will play to Bootleg's strengths.

"It will be a big, black, American ale," Brookes enthuses, "[and] we'll have it carbonated and hand-pumped.

"[Along] with Raging Bull and the Oatmeal Stout that's doing really well right now, I can see us saturating one end of the colour spectrum with these dark beers. But we do dark beers really well; the pH of our mash and our water is really good for these rich, dark ales."

Given that propensity for dark beers, Brookes states that one of his goals is "trying to stop people drinking with their eyes." He refers, of course, to the way that a beer's appearance can lead us to pre-conceived ideas about its aroma, flavour and drinkability i.e: 'Because this beer is dark it will taste like Tooheys Old or Guinness.'

Ultimately, though, this affable head brewer - who's also the venue's general manager - hopes to make Bootleg Brewery an iconic brand that's synonymous with both the Margaret River region and the best of the craft beer experience. He's well on the way.

"It's all about the beer," Brookes neatly surmises. "Sure, the food is really, really important too, but, at the end of the day, the beer in the middy, or pint glass, that gets put in front of the customer has to be the best we can possibly make.

"Having a general manager as head brewer, or vice-versa, you're not going to be cutting corners when it comes to producing the beers." 🌟

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Bootleg Tasting Notes:

Sou' West Wheat (4.7% abv)

This is Bootleg's craft beer for beginners, pouring a cloudy, pale white-gold colour with a clean white head of settling foam. It offers aromatic hints of over-ripe citrus and sourdough crusts (in place of the classic banana, bubblegum and clove spice characters you'd usually find in a wheat beer), with subtle banana flavour, accompanied by citrus, floral and bready notes on the palate. There's minimal bitterness to finish and not too much else for expectant taste buds.

Hefe (4.7% abv)

Pouring a cloudy lemon-gold with effervescent white foam, the Hefe - short for Hefeweizen (an unfiltered, German-style wheat beer) - certainly looks like the real deal. Those fresh, clean, banana and clove spice aromatics tick all the boxes, and the beer's palate-scrubbing fizz of carbonation, initial hit of banana, tart acidity, and lingering, deepening lemon-citrus resonance on the palate is authentically welcome. An excellent summer-afternoon take on the style.

Wils Pils (4.9% abv)

This Czech-style flag-bearer pours a pale gold-straw colour, capped with a fluffy white head that laces the glass most agreeably. Imported noble hops bring herbaceous, spicy, even leafy tobacco notes to the aroma, with the grainy malt base playing an essential supporting role on both the nose and palate. Those magical hops add herbal, spicy flavours and an assertive bitterness to the pilsner experience, while Margaret River rainwater keeps the mouthfeel soft and silky. Fresh and fantastic.

Tom's Amber Ale (4.0% abv)

This sessionable brew pours an orange-amber colour with a creamy collar of off-white foam, and offers a rich aromatic melange of toffee, toasty malts and peaty, earthy hops. Add fruity yeast notes and the sensory memory of honey-roasted cashews to the mix, and this seductive nose follows through on a well-balanced palate that delivers a moderately bitter finish. One for malt lovers at lunch.

Settler's Pale (4.8% abv)

A blend of WA barley types might go into producing this American-style pale ale, but it's the intense citrus-tangerine aromas of what are presumably imported US hops that are most immediately apparent here. The cloudy gold-orange brew positively assaults the palate with its moisture-mopping, citrus-grapefruit hop character, while those malts play a sweet supporting role through to a boisterously bitter finale. Hopheads need look no further.

Raging Bull (7.1% abv)

This big, dark, signature ale hasn't won its swag of Australian International Beer Awards medals by accident. It pours a deep dark-brown with a ruby hue - when held in the light - and a creamy, cappuccino head, and offers a deliciously complex array of mostly malt-derived aromatics; think coffee, cocoa, dark chocolate, treacle, dark-fruit notes and even a hint of earthy hops. The palate is similarly complex and ever evolving (as the Bull warms), with a sweet finish that's reminiscent of chocolate, coffee or fruit cake, or all three. Yum!