

Business collaborations brewing in tri-states

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As more breweries pop up across the Midwest and more small-batch, eccentric beers flow from taps, Dubuque-area businesses are capitalizing on a craft beer boom experts say has room to grow.

About 2,500 people packed into the Mystique Community Ice Center Saturday afternoon for the fifth annual Dubuque On Ice Brewfest. They sampled more than 200 beers from 50 local, regional and national breweries, along with three wineries, three distilleries and meat, cheese and other food vendors.

That compares to about 2,000 attendees and 30-plus breweries featured last year, forcing event organizers to expand exhibitor floor space to the ice center's second level.

"The craft beer market has just exploded across the nation," said Ron Breitbach, general manager of the ice center. "Every year we've grown a little bit. This year, we've taken a quantum leap. ... For a lot of small, independent breweries, this is how they market their product. They can't afford to spend big dollars (on advertising.)"

Potosi (Wis.) Brewing Co. teamed with Dubuque's Verena Street Coffee Co. this year to debut a new stout infused with the coffee roaster's Shot Tower Espresso.

Eric Gantz, co-owner of Verena Street Coffee, said it's a way for his customers to try new beers and the brewing company's customers to experience new coffee.

"We're both smaller, independent brands. We're not big, national brands, so this is a way to do some cross-promotion," said Gantz, a craft beer lover. "It's the same trend we see with coffee. People are getting tired of the same old, same old, cheap stuff on the shelf they've seen for years and years and years -- trying something different, something local."

The partnership allows the brewery to support another thriving small business while meeting growing customer demand for new craft beer choices, according to Dave Fritz, president of the Potosi Foundation Inc. Fritz said the brewery also has partnered with Blaum Bros. Distilling Co., of Galena, Ill., to work on a brand of whiskey barrel-aged beer.



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Fans cheer during a stein-holding competition Saturday.

A study released in June by the Iowa Wine and Beer Promotion Board predicts Iowa's craft beer boom is only getting started. The study projects local breweries will more than triple production between 2014 and 2019 to 146,000 barrels.

Craft brewing accounted for 1,500 jobs in 2014, and the number of Iowa breweries has doubled since 2009 to more than 50 in 29 counties, according to the board. The industry poured \$100 million into the state economy in 2014.

Lacy Knipper, of Cedar Falls, Iowa, and Carrie Johnson, of Ankeny, Iowa, walked around the Mystique Community Ice Center wearing necklaces of "palate cleansing" mini-pretzels. The message printed on their matching T-shirts: In case of emergency, my blood type is IPA-positive.

"I think it's fun, especially, to see the local breweries and see what all Iowa has to offer for different kinds of beer," Knipper said.

Proceeds from the event will go to the Potosi Brewery Foundation and Dubuque Community Ice and Recreation Center, Inc.