

Schooner Exact Brewing Company

SOMETIMES ALL IT TAKES
IS A LEAP OF FAITH

BY KENDALL JONES

Many of us daydream about leaving our jobs to pursue our passions. Matt and Heather McClung, both former educators, did more than dream; they took a leap of faith, followed their dream, and today they are the proud owners of Schooner Exact Brewing Company in Seattle's SoDo neighborhood.

"When we got home from our wedding, the documents from the Secretary of State's office were waiting for us in the mailbox," Matt says. "Our anniversary and the founding of our company are the same day."

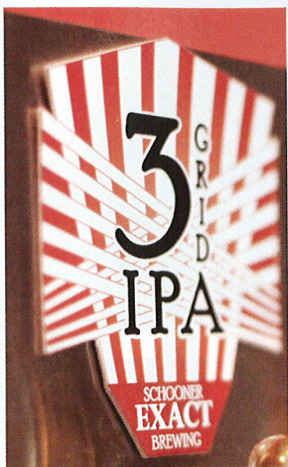
Schooner Exact Brewing Company started out in 2007 as a nano-brewery, working out of a small Active Space studio in West Seattle. In those days, Matt brewed on weekends and evenings, teaching chemistry by day at Mercer Island High School. The pint-sized operation brewed no more than three or four kegs each week, and provided beer for two neighborhood pubs.

"We barely made enough beer for our two regular accounts, West 5 in West Seattle and the 74th Street Alehouse [in Seattle's Phinney neighborhood]," he says. "We hardly had anything left over. It was all 3-Grid IPA, which meant we pretty much never got to make anything else."

Matt's wife, Heather, also an educator by day, did the company's bookkeeping as time allowed.

Fast-forward five years. Schooner Exact nowadays brews more beer each day than it previously brewed in an entire month. In its first year (2007), only 50 barrels were produced. In 2012, the brewery expects to brew 3,000 barrels—the equivalent of 6,000 kegs of beer. And both Matt and Heather give their full-time attention to the brewery.





Expansion seems to be a never-ending process at the brewery and tap room. On most days, you'll find Matt at the brewery overseeing the operation. Not only does he supervise the brewing process, but he is constantly tinkering with pipes, fittings, fermenters, glycol lines and pumps. He is mechanically inclined and insists on maintaining a hands-on approach to the brewery's continuing expansion. Schooner Exact currently supports nine employees and the next round of expansion should create at least four more jobs.

THE FIRST COUPLE OF SEATTLE BEER

Matt and his brew crew are rapidly gaining a reputation for creating delicious and creative beers, but there is a business to run and Heather plays a big part in everything that happens at Schooner Exact. What's more, she is the president of the Washington Brewers Guild. As president, it is Heather's responsibility to lead the charge when the Guild wrestles with policymakers to protect the interests of the brewing industry. To top it all off, Heather is a new mother, having delivered the couple's first child, Ellie, in February.

At the close of the 2010 school year, Matt and Heather said goodbye to their careers as educators. It was not an insignificant decision. They both were heavily invested in their teaching careers. Matt earned his National Board Certification shortly before opening the brewery. Heather, who taught kindergarten and art, is a graduate of the Master in Teaching Program at Seattle University. Still, their passion for great beer and their desire to build something that they could call their own compelled them to abandon the relative security of their careers.

"My Board Certification is good through 2016," Matt jokes, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of a busy brewery. "If this doesn't work out I can go back to teaching." But he follows that by saying that it is now hard to picture himself anywhere else.

The brewery's achievements have not gone unnoticed. Schooner Exact has secured its place in the Seattle beer market, establishing an ever-growing local fan base. More than that, Schooner Exact is familiar to many brewers across the country, recognized in large part for successfully growing from its humble beginnings on a shoestring budget, during a bleak economy, fueled by little more than desire and hard work.

Each year, members of the craft beer industry from across the nation attend the Craft Brewers Conference (CBC). It is a serious affair, primarily focused on education, at which brewers seek to learn from each other. In 2011 the CBC organizers invited Matt McClung to present a workshop. He spoke to a crowd of approximately 500 of his peers about Schooner Exact's successes and growing pains, and about the process of evolving from a nano-brewery to a microbrewery. Since then, Matt has entertained many phone calls and emails from small breweries, both near and far, seeking advice as they face the kind of expansion that Schooner Exact manages so well.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Matt and Heather live a few miles from the brewery in nearby West Seattle with their new baby and two dogs. The name Schooner Exact is a nod to the neighborhood they call home. In 1851, the Denny party landed on the shores of West Seattle in a schooner named Exact. It is one of the landmark events in Seattle history.

Most of Schooner Exact's beers take their names from some aspect of Seattle's lesser-known history. For example, the company's flagship beer, 3-Grid IPA, is named after downtown Seattle's unusual and unfortunate street layout, which is based on three disjointed grids. Another beer, Seamstress Union Raspberry Wheat Ale, pays tribute to the working girls of Seattle's early history. The story goes that in frontier Seattle, prostitution was not uncommon, but the city did not approve of seemingly unemployed individuals hanging around downtown. Anyone loitering on the streets of Seattle had to show proof of employment or union affiliation. The city's madams created the Seamstress Union to provide sewing services and otherwise attend to the needs of the city's gentlemen.

Schooner Exact's beers are in themselves a history lesson. It's not surprising, really. Although Matt and Heather McClung are no longer teachers, they just can't help themselves. ●