

Those WACKY RAVENS



Black Raven Brewing Co.
owner and brewmaster
Beaux Bowman
poses in his Remond,
Washington brewpub.

BEAUX BOWMAN OF BLACK RAVEN BREWING CO.

By Kendall Jones

Beer geeks are a fickle bunch and many of them think of breweries the way hipsters think of rock bands—they're only cool until they get popular.

What's worse, at one moment everyone thinks you are brilliant and at the next moment everyone thinks you are over-hyped. It's a fine line and it's the nature of fame in the beer world.

Beaux Bowman, owner and brewmaster at **BLACK RAVEN BREWING CO.** in Redmond, Washington, knows about the perils of popularity. Like a reluctant rock star, he is okay with recognition, and it makes him happy to see people enjoy his creations, but he's a bit leery of all the attention and is confused by the often two-faced nature of success.

"Funny, but these days I'm sometimes told that Black Raven is now too big or too popular, yet we only produced 4,800 barrels of beer in 2014," Bowman says. "I'm happy folks like what we do. We fly by our own rules over here."

Indeed, Bowman, his band of brewers and Black Raven's diehard fans are a flock unto themselves. "If you are an unhappy person, you probably won't like us," Bowman says, commenting on the irreverent, playful character of the brewery and its beers.

EVOLUTION OF BIRDS

So how did this affable trickster and his brewery take flight? To some extent, it is a Darwinian tale of extinction and evolution. While attending college at William Carey University in Mississippi in the 1990s, Bowman worked in a processing lab for Kodak, a job he enjoyed until it became clear that the photo processing industry was teetering on the brink of extinction in the face of digital photography's rapid evolution.

That's when he began to contemplate a career change. He had been curiously homebrewing, recognized that the beer industry was budding and began to think about pursuing a career as a brewer. Instead of transferring to the fermentation science program at University of California, Davis and tacking on another two years of his

education, Bowman says he thought he would try a less traditional path to learning the art of brewing.

"I figured I would try a different route and secure some work in a brewery, washing kegs or doing whatever else new guys do, just get into the industry and see if I liked it," Bowman says. "At that time [1999], there were no breweries in Mississippi."

Luckily for Bowman, his brother happened to live in Washington, where there were plenty of breweries. In 2000, he moved to Redmond, shackled up with his brother and focused his attention on getting a job in a brewery. He landed his first gig at Mac and Jack's Brewing Co. in Redmond, where he eventually became a brewer and worked the night shift. Moving on, he continued his brewing career at the dearly departed Far West Ireland Brewing Co. in Redmond, before picking up gigs at The RAM in Seattle's University Village location and Lazy Boy Brewing Co. in Everett.

Then it was time to make the big leap and build his own brewery. Black Raven Brewing fired up the brew kettle for the first time in 2009 and quickly became



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the darling of the Seattle beer scene. At first, like most people, Bowman attributed all the attention and the long lines at beer festivals to the fact that his was a new brewery on the eastside of Seattle, an area that was, at that time, desperate for a new brewery to call its own.

A couple of years passed and the new car smell faded, but the lines only got longer and the brewery's special release bottles became highly coveted treasures among beer geeks.

"I never really understood the 'cult status' thing," he says, referring to the kind of idolatry endured by some other breweries, the direction some onlookers feared Black Raven was headed by no fault of its own. "People have figured out who we are and what to expect."

In six years, the brewery has grown into its own skin, expanding operations while continuing to dazzle beer lovers, but managing to avoid the trappings of superstardom. Black Raven is highly regarded and adored, but not worshipped. Today people admire the brewery strictly because of the beer and not because of any mystique, hysteria or engineered exclusivity. That



suits Bowman just fine; it's what he's always wanted. No "cult status" and no Kool-Aid, just seriously good, creative beers.

CULTURE HERO

These days, Bowman doesn't get to put on his brewer's boots nearly as much as he'd like, spending much of his time managing the business of the brewery.

"Sometimes I've just got to walk around the brewery and clean a keg or something, do something else to clear my head," Bowman says. "This next year I expect to be back in the boots a bit more. The business is expanding and growing—there's a lot of stuff going on that has to be dealt with and decisions to be made that only we can make."

In opening Black Raven Brewing, Bowman and his business partner, Kat Gillespie, rushed nothing and sweated every detail. There's even a very thoughtful explanation for the brewery's name, one that speaks well to the character of the brewery and its founder. In the mythology of many indigenous tribes of the Northwest, the raven is seen as a culture hero, a revered and benevolent, transformative figure. The raven helps people, blesses them with gifts and shapes the world. But at the same time, he is a frivolous trickster, a light-hearted prankster who is sometime gluttonous and impatient.

At one moment, Bowman is serious, contemplative and dry, but at the next moment he's running around the pub in a gorilla costume, shrieking and howling as he tosses bananas around the room. It has happened.

"We are not your *normal* brewery and we are not always for everyone's taste," he says. "We like to have fun with the beer, the brand and our customers. We are always respectful, yet a bit irreverent in that we don't take ourselves too seriously. Sure, it's a business and we are professionals, but why not have fun with it? The raven as our totem works perfectly. We like to think we are creative, wise, playful and a bit bird-brained—just like those wacky ravens." ●

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