
THE MOUNT SHASTA BREWING COMPANY

THE MICROBREWERY THAT COULD

STORY AND PHOTOS BY EARL BLOOR

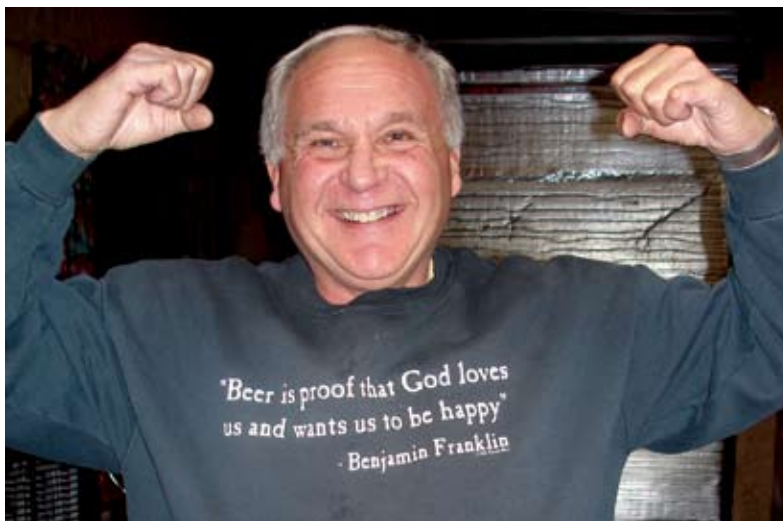
Mount Shasta Brewery knows all about beer. Beer is a beverage that is mostly water, containing anywhere from 3 to 9% alcohol and higher and many other ingredients in very small quantities, which give the beer its character. The beer-

making process starts with grain, which after malting possesses the enzymes needed to convert its main constituent, starch, into sugar. Yeast converts the sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide. Mount Shasta Brewery owner Vaune Dillmann works that process in Weed in northern California. His “legal Weed,” both ales and lagers, is the product.

Malting. *Grain (barley, wheat or rye) germinates, creating enzymes to convert starch into sugar. Dried, roasted, and crushed, this is the grist..*

In 1974, young, recently married, a cop in Oakland, Vaune Dillmann abandoned his career in law enforcement to return with his bride to the area her family homesteaded years before. He took up ownership and operation of the Black Butte Saloon in Weed, about 50 miles south of the Oregon border, just off exit 747 of the I-5 highway.

In 1897, Abner Weed was also looking for a career change when, for \$400, he purchased the 280 acres of land in what is now the city of Weed from Siskiyou Lumber and Mercantile. Abner Weed, born in Maine and present at Lee’s surrender in Appomattox, had come to California in 1869. It may have been the winds that attracted him to this undeveloped region in northern California. The winds swirling down the northern slope from the Black Butte summit and then swooping turbulently upward toward the peak of neighboring Mount Shasta would help dry the green lumber harvested from the area. The lumber industry rapidly grew the community to



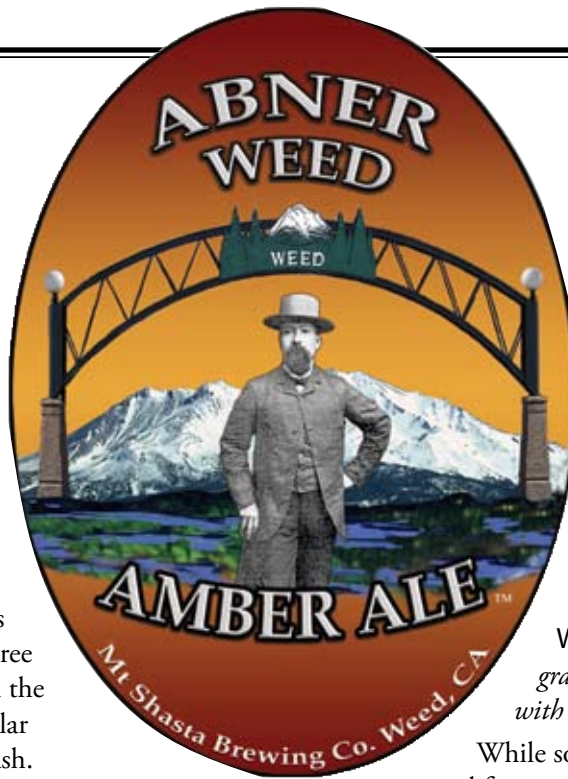
2,000, and, when he sold the Weed Lumber Company in 1905, the new company was capitalized at \$2M. Weed (the man) remained as a County Supervisor for many years and was a California state senator from 1907-1909. Weed (the city) prospered with

its logging and milling industries and, not without some justification, was described in *The Redding Free Press* at the time as the “Sodom and Gomorrah of Siskiyou County.”

Mashing. *Grist is mixed with heated water in a vat. Enzymes in malt break the starch down into sugars. This stage determines the character and the alcohol content of the beer. Takes 1-2 hours.*

After twenty-five years operating the Black Butte Saloon and raising his family, Vaune Dillmann experienced the pull of his family’s Milwaukee heritage toward beer-making. The Medo-Bel Creamery, a stalwart of the community since 1920 with its daily milk deliveries but now long out of business, was due for tax auction in 1992 and, three days before the scheduled auction, Vaune purchased it as the site of the new Mount Shasta Brewing Company.

On first thought, a creamery is the ideal site for a brewery. It is set up for bottling beverage, with a sterile bottling environment and the concomitant miles of plumbing to deliver the cleansing steam and wash water. However, the two-and-a-half acres that the abandoned creamery and adjoining properties occupied needed to be cleaned up, because they were discovered to be deeply contaminated with gasoline leaked from the gasoline storage tanks that fueled the fleet of Medo-Bel trucks for their daily milk deliveries. It took seven years and a quarter of a million dollars in state funding before the site was awarded a clean bill of environmental health. The clean-up project was the first of many challenges



Dillmann has surmounted toward the fulfillment of his Mount Shasta brewing dream.

Little besides the sterile bottling set-up proved useful. The creamery had been built in an era when energy was abundant. Many changes refurbished the building to Dillmann's twenty-first century values. Twenty-three thermal-paned skylights now brighten the former creamery. Passive and active solar heating pre-heats the water for the mash.

In addition to making the building functional, Dillmann had to make it inviting. "People don't realize what they throw away. I don't look at something for what it is, but I search for what it can be," says Dillmann, Weed's king of recycling. For his tasting room Vaune reclaimed the golden oak bar from Rosie's Saloon in Fort Jones, forty-five miles from Weed, southwest of Yreka. The restaurant upstairs from the tasting room has been in construction for ten years and awaits approval from the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control. The walls are decorated with Earl Lamb murals painted in 1960 and salvaged by Dillmann from the walls of a Mount Shasta saloon. These murals, painted when the artist was 88 years old, depict local scenes—Mount Shasta, Crater Lake, Burney Falls, and the Eddy group of mountains. Also in the restaurant are a hospital bed (for use when it's too chilly to

go home), a dentist's chair, a gifted baby grand piano, circa 1850, and a 1928 vintage shuffle board, donated by the owner for the price of its removal from his basement, a task accomplished by the College of the Siskiyous football team.

Wort. Liquid that is strained from the grains. Boiled in a copper kettle, usually with hops.

While some of this recycling serves brewery and future restaurant customers' comfort, some too addresses the business of making beer. From the Summit Brewing Company in St. Paul, Minnesota, Dillmann salvaged a beautiful 28 hectoliter copper, brass, and stainless Bavarian porcelain brew kitchen. On its way through the mountains near Weed, a curve in road taken too fast ruptured half the copper base. Now the brew kitchen rests upon a stainless steel pedestal. Finally, the acquisition of a 15 barrel PUB Brewing System from the University of California at Davis set the Mount Shasta Brewing Company for production.

Fermentation. Yeast is added to convert the sugars from the malt into alcohol and carbon dioxide. 1-3 weeks.

And a tasty beer it is. "It's the water – it's phenomenal!" enthuses Dillmann. At fourteen thousand feet, Mount Shasta dominates the skyline of Northern California and captures huge volumes of precipitation, much of which filters through the lava tubes within the mountain, finally bubbling from artesian springs. One of these springs supplies Weed its water. People who grow up in Weed look forward to coming back to the clean and distinctive taste of the city's water.

Conditioning. The "green" beer is moved to conditioning tanks. One week for ales to several months for lagers.

Since producing its first draft beer in 2004 and its first bottled beer in 2005, the Mount Shasta Brewing Company microbrewery is making a name for itself. Their Shastafarian Porter was rated the best of all porters at the 2007 California Brewers Festival in Sacramento. In the Brewery's description, it "presents a mild bitterness and a spicy aroma while blending caramel, coffee, chocolate, and subtle roasted malt flavors." To





the judges, it's a winner.

Other brews available at their tasting room include Lemurian Golden Lager (referring to the myth of Telos, a subterranean city beneath Mount Shasta populated by citizens of the long-lost continent of Lemuria) and the Abner Weed Amber Ale (say that three times fast!). A highlight of our mid-November tasting was the strawberry porter, the brew slowly conditioned over locally grown, pureed strawberries.

Bottling. The conditioned beer is filtered and packaged.

The prospect of sampling the crystal clear Mount Shasta water subtly flavor-enhanced by head brewer Josh Riggs and affably served by tap man, owner, and civic visionary Vaune Dillmann should bring you to Weed. For the winter, Riggs and assistant brewer Marco Noriega have created a new brew, the Stout of Jefferson. The name recollects a depression-era proposition calling for the secession of the northern part of California from Chico up to Eugene, Oregon, to form the new state of Jefferson. The Stout of Jefferson is appropriately a

strong American stout—7.2% alcohol—brewed from two-row barley malt, flavored with nugget hops and orange peels. One keg has been slowly aged over coffee, as with the summer strawberry beer. Neither this special keg nor the strawberry porter will be sold at Mount Shasta Brewing Company distribution sites throughout California, Oregon, and Washington (including local Raley's and Holiday Markets, Sunset Market in Redding, and Mountain People's Market in Auburn). Rather, these low-volume creations reward those who visit the tasting room during its Thursday to Saturday openings to sip beer at the reconstructed nineteenth-century bar or to have their half gallon growlers filled to drink at home. ☘

To get there, drive Interstate 5 to exit 747 and proceed the half-mile west to 360 College Avenue, the site of the Mount Shasta Brewing Company tasting room. The freshly-brewed beer we enjoyed at the 24 foot golden oak bar there cannot be matched. You can keep the memory alive by taking a variety six-pack home.