

BARRACKS BREWING

Beer at the Old U.S. Air Force Base

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Inside the tuscan-columned Old Stone Barracks in Plattsburgh, across the bar, two nutcrackers stand on a shelf sticking out from a column. One is a souvenir from veterans Mary Pearl and Terry Schmalz's visit to Germany. The other is from their daughter. The figurine represents power and strength serving to guard and protect families. It fits perfectly in the 178-year-old U.S. Army Camp — now the veterans' family-friendly craft brewery called Valcour Brewing Company.

The journey to welcome the community to a place that has been closed to public for about a century was long. Named after the Battle of Valcour, the brewery opened its doors to the public mid-January, two years after Pearl and Schmalz bought the building. Late permits and brewing equipment were part of the reason why the opening date kept being pushed, but they didn't give up. "You don't stop at the first 'No,'" Schmalz says. "No is a reason to look for different directions."

Throughout the tasting room, different signs of hard labor are visible. It gives the brewery a homey feel. The hardwood floor is a patchwork of reused panels that were removed to open up the brewery space. The ceiling reveals different sized, curved beams hand-hewn by the original contractors. On a black wallboard next to the pellet stove, a wooden sign with a three-dimensional logo of Valcour Brewing Company is displayed — a handmade gift

from the couple's friend and local artisan Jim Tyler. On the red wall across the room, under the nutcracker, hangs an appreciation plaque from the U.S. Army.

"When he (Schmalz) left command, the special forces unit presented it to him for what he did as a commander of that unit," Pearl says.

Schmalz and Pearl met in the Army during their last assignment in Charlottesville, Virginia. Schmalz, a colonel, was the deputy commander for the National Ground Intelligence Center. Pearl, also a colonel, was the chief of staff for the National Ground Intelligence Center. They hit it off quickly when they realized they had more in common than their love and commitment for their country. They loved beer too.

After completing their duties for the U.S., Pearl and Schmalz, who had taken brewing classes and made beer at home for six years, decided to move back to the Adirondack area.

In 2014, Pearl and Schmalz saw the "For Sale" sign outside the barracks while looking for a place to advance their brewing dream. The couple wanted to move back to Pearl's hometown, so they bought the building Pearl used to admire on her bus rides to and from St. John's Academy, the Old Stone Barracks. They transformed the barracks into a family-friendly brewery where no table is the same.

"We went to different yard sales for the tables and chairs. And

uniform. You walk in and feel like home."

Visitors can see most of the hard work Pearl and Schmalz have put into their business, but they won't taste it. Despite their brewing experience, the couple won't personally brew the beer.

"You can be a home brewer and be great, but you need a professional," Pearl says.

They found their expert in Head Brewmaster/Executive chef Rob Davis, a multi-award winning brewer and previous executive chef at Irises in downtown Plattsburgh. He received the Matthew Vassar Cup — a prize awarded to the best craft brewery in Hudson Valley — while brewing for the Great Adirondack Brewing Company. He was also awarded a golden medal for his Belgian Abbey Dubbel, a beer with flavors of clove and banana, but without the cloves or bananas. It gets its taste simply from the strain of yeast.

"From 1999-2004, I had probably about 15 to 20 (awards)," Davis says. "I was probably the most decorated at the Tap of NY, which was also the most furious of the competitions."

With Davis' skill and reputation, the brewery was able to sell out all its beer within two hours on their soft-opening night. Nearly 500 people showed up to drink and finally see the barracks transformation.

Currently, Valcour Brewing Company offers four beers — "Copper Nail," "Benedict Arnold's Double IPA," "Elwood's Double Wood Smoked Porter," and "Holden's Golden." The names play off the history of the barracks or the area, Pearl says. Well, at least three of them.

The "Copper Nail" was named after the copper nails they found at the barracks. The first winter Schmalz, Pearl and their children went to the barracks they pulled out countless copper nails from the ceiling rafters. Schmalz pulled out the most nails. If you look at the ceiling you'll see the myriads of tiny holes from the nails, which they saved.

"Benedict Arnold's Double IPA," is named, as the name suggests, after General Benedict Arnold from Great Britain. Pearl

says one thing most people don't realize is that Arnold fought for the U.S. in the Battle of Valcour — a battle against the British army. He later defected to the British army, hence the "double" in the name. "He was a double traitor," Pearl says.

The hand-smoked porter, "Elwood's Double Wood Smoked Porter," got its name from a man who immortalized himself in the barracks.

"On the second floor, up in the ceiling rafters, we were looking at one of the rafters and sure enough back in Jan 6. 1845 this guy Moses Elwood signed his name as "Moses Elwood Jan 6. 1845," so we incorporated his name into one of our beers," Davis says.

The "Holden's Golden" is named after Holden Caulfield from the novel "The Catcher in the Rye," J. D. Salinger's novel, one that Pearl read while in school. However, there's a little military connection to be made. Salinger is a veteran who served as Counter-Intelligence Agent during World War II.

Schmalz and Pearl decided to use the remainder of the 200-foot long, two-story building for an inn, general store and kitchen — all of which will be open by late May. The kitchen will serve gastropub style food like homemade baked beans, homemade flatbread, smoked sandwiches and baby back ribs. The food will be sourced as locally as possible and they intend on using beef from Kilcoyne Farm. Davis will use traditional smokehouse techniques in preparation of the food.

"We're not looking to be a white tablecloth restaurant," Davis says. "We just want it to be fun, but just really well-thought out, really well-executed and it will be of highest quality."

Despite all its offerings, Valcour Brewing Company is first and foremost a brewery. That's why the tasting room is designed to expose the brewing system in the basement.

"We want people to always be able to feel in contact with the brewery," Davis says. To know that it's there, and that's where that product is being made. Literally 30 feet from where they're sitting."