

Suds and Savories

Behind the scene at Max Lager's Wood-Fired Grill & Brewery

We sat down recently with Brewmaster John Roberts and Owners Alan and Cindy LeBlanc to learn what makes this Atlanta standby tick—and how it's helped bring beer into the southern spotlight.

How did you come up with the Max Lager's concept?

Alan: Our nephew JR (John Roberts), who is a partner and brewer, was the seed-planter. John was an avid home brewer in Boston and really wanted to take brewing beyond just a hobby. He was writing articles on home brewing as well.

JR: I got fanatical with brewing. I loved it from the first moment I tried it. I really liked the challenge of making lagers, and not many people were doing it in the early '90s. We thought it would be a great concept—many of our lagers are brewed lighter for the hotter weather.

Alan: Cindy and I were looking at new initiatives and John proposed opening a brewery or brew pub. We were living in Atlanta and with John wanting to move closer to his Alabama roots, Atlanta seemed like the perfect location. At first, Cindy and I resisted the prospect of opening a restaurant, but after some research and tasting JR's beer, our interests began to grow. JR had brewed a dark lager that just blew us away. As Cindy and I traveled, we visited breweries around the country and started thinking we could create a brewpub where the food was just as good as the beer. When we came up with the name Max Lager's, we knew it was *fait accompli*.

Cindy: Once we had the name and beer down, we created a menu with a unique focus on wood-fired cuisine that further differentiated us from other brewery restaurants.

How do you determine what beers you brew?

JR: We always have six Max beers on tap, including our standards as well as numerous seasonals. I've brewed over 60 different styles over the years.

Alan: With JR's creativity, you never know what



Brewmaster John Roberts



he's going to do next. Except blueberry beer—he'll never make that [laughs].

JR: I don't really follow trends. I'm a traditional brewer—I like beer to taste like beer. I just tapped my Chocolate Bock, and I think it's one of the best beers I've put on. It's just how I pictured it. Shortly, I'll have on a Japanese-style dry lager brewed with rice. We're brewing it as a Drink Beer Do Good beer to raise funds for Japanese relief.

"I don't really listen to anyone, to be honest [laughs]. I do my own thing."

—John Roberts

Alan: What makes JR such a good brewer is that he brews for himself. He also understands the strength of plain old good beer. We're not about extremes. You know, John graduated from Berklee College of Music, and it's evident that he has the perfect combination of creativity and technical knowledge—a balance of the left and right side of the brain. JR's beers capture that balance.

You mentioned wood-fired cuisine. Can you tell us a little bit about your menu?

Alan: As far as the menu goes, we use good-quality, fresh ingredients prepared the right way. We create a balanced sense to our food.

Cindy: We do try to keep things simple, certainly as far as food is concerned. Our steaks and seafood are cooked over wood, and we have a smoker and a wood-burning pizza oven. John's beers are a great match for our House-Smoked Pork Chops, Creole BBQ Shrimp, or any one of our wood-fired pizzas.

Alan: I'll tell you, I wasn't looking forward to trying John's pumpkin beer, but the subtlety of the flavors was amazing—pumpkin, nutmeg, cinnamon. It's like a menu item in itself.

As a brewery, do you pair food with beer?

JR: To be honest, I'm not one of the biggest believers in pairing beer or wine with specific dishes. I think people should drink what they like—it's all about opinion. Instead of educational seminars, we've done beer judging seminars, teaching people how beer is judged in contests and how to assess the quality of a beer, not just flavor. I find that to be

far more helpful for people.

Alan: We go over the standard beer judging categories so that people know the way that each is officially judged. But it's all up to the individual palate. At the same time, we don't go out of our way to hammer beer into our food. It's used, of course—our barbecue sauce has always had our beer in it and our ribs are basted in beer. It's also used in some of our sauces. But we don't overdo it.

Cindy: We just have fun with it—like at the Father's Day meal, where we pair beers with different courses. Beer Judging 101 is fantastic because people can become judges in just a few hours. Our staff is helpful when offering pairing suggestions, but in the end people tend to drink what they like.

How would you characterize the beer knowledge of your average guest?

Cindy: Being on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta, we have a diverse client base—people from all over the world come to Max Lager's. Many Europeans come looking for specific beers, but we also have a lot of home brewers and pub crawlers who study our beers. Downtown Atlanta also has many conventions and conferences with attendees who don't know much about beer. For many of these, a sampler is a perfect way to start.

Alan: I can say over the last 13 years we've been brewing, there's been a steady growth in general beer knowledge. When we first opened, it wasn't like being in Portland or Colorado—there wasn't much of a beer culture in Atlanta then. Thirteen years later, interest and knowledge has increased exponentially. People are also a lot more open-minded about tasting craft-brewed beers.

Cindy: We're definitely reaping the benefits of that now. This is one of the reasons we offer over 30 varieties of bottled beers as well as ciders on tap. We're growing.

Alan: Really, it comes down to offering beers that JR likes.

Serving Atlanta for 13 years, you must be involved in the community.

Alan: We are definitely dedicated to the downtown Atlanta area, so we're involved in a lot of community activities—such as our own Drink Beer Do Good Program which aids

the homeless in Atlanta. We sponsor Susan G. Komen, American Red Cross, Project Open Hand, and Atlanta Gateway Center.

Cindy: We have also had a nine-year relationship with the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. Each year, JR creates a special beer for their Chocolate! fundraising event. This year, JR brewed Gimme Chocolate Bock which incorporates chocolate nibs imported from Ghana. We are also designating the Gimme Chocolate Bock as a Drink Beer Do Good beer where 50 cents of each bock sold goes to charity.

JR, have you collaborated with other breweries?

JR: I did a collaboration brew recently for American Beer Week. I brewed Max Security with JailHouse Brewing, and we brewed a smoked schwarzbier. We're hoping to brew it again and bottle it. Everyone loved it!

How do you feel about beer competitions?

Alan: Our philosophy is, we compete everyday. Every time a guest tries our beer, food, and service, we're being judged.

JR: More officially, last year we entered in the Great American Beer Festival in Denver for the first time in over 10 years, and we'll enter again this year. Although we didn't medal, we had a lot of fun and learned a little bit about the process. This year, I'll focus on some of my favorite beers including our HOPSPLOSION!!! IPA, Gimme Chocolate Bock, Imperial Mocha Oatmeal Stout, and Gran Cru Belgian Style.

Alan: We've been open for 13 years, and a lot of critically-acclaimed operations have opened and closed in that time—breweries and restaurants. I'd say we compete very well.

Do you get a lot of feedback from customers as far as the beer goes?

JR: I don't really listen to anyone, to be honest [laughs]. I do my own thing.

Cindy: We listen to guests, we listen to employees. We listen to the people associated with us. But at the end of the day, the questions are answered by the restaurant itself. You can't listen to everyone and you can't please everyone. Even though JR doesn't listen to anyone when he brews, people come here and know what they're going to get. It's the same thing with the food—we're very respectful of why people come here. They understand the soul of Max Lager's.

—Jeffrey Steen