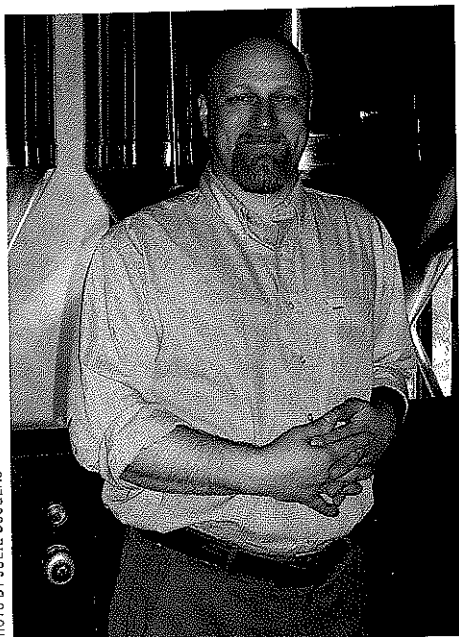


Brewmaster John Roberts

By Julie Douglas



John Roberts

John Roberts is master brewer and co-owner of Max Lager's, "Atlanta's oldest independent restaurant brewery." Roberts honed his brewing chops in Boston then joined his aunt and uncle, Alan and Cindy LeBlanc, in opening the Peachtree Street venture. His passion is evident in his brews and his mischievous streak even more so in his 11% alcohol Imperial IPA. *Restaurant Forum* spoke to Roberts about his love of suds and his path to Max Lager's.

Restaurant Forum: What's the first beer you ever tried?

John Roberts: My father's Coors. For some reason, my father thought that it was the best beer and would go all the way to Arkansas to bring it back to the Gulf Shores of Alabama, where I'm from. I remember drinking it and thinking, "Ugh, I hate this."

RF: How did you get into brewing?

JR: Drinking beer (laughs). I went to school at the Berklee School of Music in

Boston. At the time, the microbrew revolution was just taking off and I was there. I witnessed Jim Cook, the owner of Sam Adams, walking down the street with two six-packs in his hands, going bar to bar selling them. I ended up living an eighth of a mile away from his test brewery — crawling distance, as I used to call it. I spent some time there talking to the brewers, getting as much information as I could and started home brewing. I knew from the first minute I started that I loved it.

RF: Where did you work before Max Lager's?

JR: I gave up my day job in studio engineering and started interning with breweries. I took a job with a home brew supply store and built a brew-on-premise facility for them and was brewery manager. I still, to this day, say it was my favorite job of all time. I went to work at 10 a.m. and tested all the beers to make sure that they were doing all right — just a little for empirical study. We needed 10 new recipes a week and I'd make up test batches. Customers would come in, I'd talk beer and make beer all day and went home happy — early, too! I gained a lot of weight!

I came to Atlanta to prepare to open the brewpub in 1996, but the process was slow. So I took a job with Atlanta Brewing Company and I became a head brewer. That was during the Olympics. I did a lot of brewing during that time. I lost a lot of weight! I worked there for a little over a year and a half. Then we opened Max Lager's in 1998 and have been going ever since.

RF: What beer stoked your imagination?

JR: When I was 18, I tried a Moosehead beer and thought, "That actually tastes

good." I started drinking imports — at the time there were no microbreweries. The first microbrew beer that made me think, "This is what I should be doing" was Sam Adams. My brewer-friends probably cringe when they hear that. But to this day, I still love Sam Adams. Then all the microbrews started coming out. Sierra Nevada Pale Ale just blew my mind, initially.

RF: Where do you get your inspiration?

JR: I'm more of a traditional brewer. I'll occasionally venture out on the extreme. I like what American brewers have done with traditional styles by making them a little more extreme, with a lot of hop power to it. But I'm not just a "hop head," as we call ourselves. I love subtly in beer as well. Any time I taste a beer I like, I get inspired by that. There are style guidelines that I venture beyond. I'm not stuck with "all malt beer, all of the time."

RF: I imagine you love all your beers as if they were your children. But is there one that you'd take with you to a desert island?

JR: If I had to pick one, it would be the Imperial IPA. I made it on a whim without a recipe. When it came out I said, "This is what I want."

RF: Do you have brew master philosophy?

JR: I'm a real hands-on person. If it's going to be craft-made, it should be craft-made, and not computer made. In a brewpub the idea is, "Maybe each batch doesn't taste the same, a little different here and there. Maybe I feel like putting more hops in it this time. Or I want to try something different this time." ■