

Hopping

**After the flood, beer tourism
kindles a new future for
Waterbury**

By MELISSA PASANEN

Photographed by

JEB WALLACE-BRODEUR

LATE ONE WEDNESDAY MORNING, Lynn Mason and Dave Juenker were busy behind the bar of Blackback Pub, the establishment they own in downtown Waterbury. Even though it was midweek and not traditional tourist season, barstools soon filled with customers, from Syracuse, Albany and two different parts of Connecticut, ordering lunch and weighing options from the tap list on the chalkboard. Two had already been to the fabled Hill Farmstead Brewery, in nearby Greensboro, to score prized bottles of a special release. They had all come to Vermont for one reason: beer.

While craft beer has been a boon to Vermont overall, no town has benefited more from the rising tide of local world-class breweries than Waterbury. The hub of beer tourism, Waterbury boasts many sought-after beers on tap downtown and is located just a short drive to other microbrew destinations. In recent years, the community of 5,000 has been named the best beer town in New England and even among the world's best cities for craft beer. From a one-horse town shadowed by its association with the state psychiatric hospital, Waterbury has become a 120-plus-tap town catering to beer aficionados from around the globe. It still astonishes Mason that her hometown, which embarrassed her as a teenager, now attracts hop growers from New Zealand and beer geeks from Japan. "We've always had the location but also the stigma," she admitted.

“Beer reinvented this town,” Juenker said.

The transformation started in 2003 when The Alchemist Pub and Brewery opened on South Main Street. Heady Topper, its flagship double IPA, went on to earn dozens of top ratings and has been called “America’s most coveted beer.” The hoppy but balanced brew was initially served only on tap at the pub, until owners John and Jen Kimmich figured out that customers were sneaking pints into the restroom and pouring them into growlers to take home, even to sell. The Kimmichs decided they needed to package their own beer, and had just finished building a cannery — on the north side of the highway in Waterbury — when Tropical Storm Irene struck downtown in late August 2011. Flooding severely damaged their business, and many others, as well as numerous homes, the state office complex, and facilities for a few dozen remaining patients of the Vermont State Hospital.

The destruction was devastating, but in retrospect, many conclude that it helped move Waterbury forward. Even though both Ben & Jerry’s and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (now Keurig Green Mountain Inc.) had brought energy and investment to the town, it had struggled to separate its identity from the hospital, which operated downtown for over a century until Irene forced it to close for good.



◀ A scene along **Stowe Street**.

Waterbury's vibrant downtown has few, if any, vacant storefronts.

▼ Reconstruction of the **Waterbury State Office Complex**. Tropical Storm Irene hit hard, but the urgency to rebuild helped Waterbury accelerate its turnaround.





▲ Lynn Mason grew up in Waterbury, where she sold insurance for 27 years before she and her husband, Dave Juenker, bought **Blackback Pub** in 2014. They added a kitchen and hired another Waterbury native, chef Jamie Nelson, to create a menu of locally accented bar classics, including a top-notch burger made with beef from a nearby farm and killer pub nachos with smoked bacon, blue cheese, cheddar and maple-chipotle sauce. Their frequently changing tap list is about 80 percent Vermont-brewed. “Waterbury was an institution town,” Mason said, noting that when the Kimmichs first opened *The Alchemist*, “they pushed everyone to a different level of beer as well as food.” Despite that, Juenker said, the town remains low-key: “It’s chill. There’s no pretense.”

“When *The Alchemist* settled in the middle of town, it set the tone for where Waterbury was going to go,” said Karen Nevin, executive director of the nonprofit Revitalizing Waterbury. “We were getting there, but the flood happened and kicked us in the pants.”

Community members had long been working to help Waterbury get its mojo back. In 1991, a critical downtown block was in danger of being replaced by a car wash, but a fundraising effort saved the structure from demolition. Revitalizing Waterbury was founded that same year to support the town’s social, economic and historic vitality; about a decade ago, Waterbury earned status as a designated downtown in Vermont, making certain

projects eligible for federal tax credits. Over the years, downtown Waterbury has enjoyed modest benefits from its proximity to ski areas and year-round outdoor recreation, but beer made Waterbury a destination unto itself.

A cluster of bars, restaurants, brewpubs and a craft beer retailer form the heart of beer tourism in the downtown, with ripple effects helping such businesses as hotels, gas stations and retail stores. “We have a very rare problem for a downtown: no vacant storefronts,” Nevin said. Savvy businesspeople work the opportunity, like the art gallery that sells *Heady Topper* posters, and the café that offers tea towels printed: “Beer guts are hot, actually.” Beer tourism was

especially helpful during the four years after Irene, when hundreds of government employees worked elsewhere as the state office complex was rebuilt.

The area’s beer buzz only continues to grow. This summer, *The Alchemist* opened a new brewery and visitors center at 100 Cottage Club Road in nearby Stowe, and Lawson’s Finest Liquids plans its first public brewery and tasting room in Waitsfield, positioning Waterbury as a pit stop between the two. “We are so fortunate to be at this crossroads,” said

Chad Fry, co-owner of *The Reservoir Restaurant and Tap Room*, which claims the largest draft list in the state and recently launched its own nanobrewery on their building’s third floor. As Fry and his business partner, Mark Frier, began building up the business around 2010, “I don’t think anybody could have seen that Waterbury was going to be recognized nationally as a leading craft beer town,” Fry said. “It’s a really strong economic driver and the great thing is that they come no matter what kind of weather we get.” 🍀



▲ **Prohibition Pig** owner Chad Rich spent some years out of state but moved back partly because he saw that craft beer was poised to take off in a big way. After taking over the original Alchemist Pub and Brewery space post-Irene, he offers this wry advice: "Never go into the place that's ranked the No. 1 brewpub in the state." Rich has carved his own path to success over the last four years with the assistance of executive chef Michael Werneke, brewer Nate Johnson (pictured), who heads up the brewery Rich opened a couple of years after the pub, and the talented kitchen staff. Prohibition Pig's menu is known for its bold creations — like the local beef burger with smoked paprika aioli, bacon and crispy onion strings or sweet potato waffle sliders layered with fried chicken salad, dried cranberries and Vermont blue cheese — which pair well with house brews ranging from toasty brown ales to a vanilla bean porter.



▲ **Craft Beer Cellar** co-owners Mark Drutman (pictured) and Victor Osinaga are beer geeks who came to craft brew paradise and never left. The business partners met in Brooklyn. Drutman, who worked for a beer distributor, started coming to Waterbury to go to The Alchemist. "I used to drag my friends from Burlington," he recalls. "There wasn't much here and they'd say, 'Why are we going to Waterbury?'" When the two decided to open a beer store, Waterbury was the obvious place. "I consider it the epicenter of the Vermont beer scene," Drutman said. "We all kind of feed off each other. Our success is in the communal experience." They opened their independently owned franchise in 2013 in a former auto parts store that still bears high water marks on its brick corner from the floods of 2011 and 1927. The inventory of over 700 beers and hard ciders includes more than 100 from Vermont. "We get three different kinds of customers," said Osinaga. "Beer geeks who don't need any help, people just looking for Heady [Topper] and the locals who ask, 'What's new that I haven't had yet?'"

◀ When Michael Miller moved his **La Strada Bakery** to the alley behind Stowe Street 24 years ago, the street was half empty, he recalls, and the Graves block in danger of being torn down. "Waterbury was not on the hot list at the time," he notes dryly. "It was very, very quiet." Still, it met his needs to be centrally located between his major wholesale accounts in a village with space for a retail counter. "Waterbury really has always been a crossroads," he said. Irene, he feels, had a big impact because of the number of cleanup volunteers who came from Chittenden County: "They realized we were here and close. Now they want to see what's going on."

▼ Nicole Grenier (pictured) was a mental health professional who switched gears and opened **Stowe Street Café** a little over a year ago. "I wouldn't have done this anywhere else but here," she said. "I first moved here for the central location, but what kept me here was the incredible community." Her kitchen team builds hearty protein bowls from spinach, kale, quinoa, chickpeas, pumpkin seeds, hard-boiled eggs and house-made miso dressing and makes a standout Vermont-meets-Vietnam banh mi sandwich with local pork belly, house chicken pâté and kimchi. While coffee is more likely to be the brew of choice at the café, the team recognizes the positive power of craft beer. "Ben & Jerry's and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters put us on the map, but beer blew us up," said barista Andrea Andrus.

