

NW IOWA BREWERY CONTINUES ON A GROWTH TRAJECTORY WITH GOLD MEDAL WINS

How did West O Beer, a two-year-old northwest Iowa microbrewery, go from “new kid on the block” to winning back-to-back gold medals in national competition? Founder Matt Matthiesen sums it up this way: “Our philosophy has always been simple...Brew Better Beer...which implies it’s a process of constant improvement. We think winning two gold medals is an affirmation of that commitment.”



The wins he mentions are big ones for his company, which sits on West Okoboji Lake in Dickinson County. On September 26, 2015, one of their beers, West O CocO™ Chocolate Stout, won a repeat gold medal in Denver, Colorado at the prestigious Great American Beer Festival® 2015, for the category Sweet or Cream Stout, the same category for their gold medal win in 2014.

Pick any segment of industry and there will be contests and awards. What makes this one so special is the status of the Great American Beer Festival®. Head Brewer Karl Schmitz, who created the recipe for West O CocO, sums it up. “The GABF is one of the biggest beer competitions in the United States. We obviously hoped to win for CocO again, but it’s very difficult to win twice in a row with 74 others competing in your category.” Matt Matthiesen adds “we’re honored to receive this double recognition from the industry, from experts, and from our peers. It really shines a very favorable light on Iowa craft beer as a whole.” Two other Iowa breweries took home gold medals – Lion Bridge Brewing of Cedar Rapids and Exile Brewing of Des Moines.

Matt and Michaela (Sailer) Matthiesen grew their home brewing hobby into a 6,000 square foot state-of-the-art brewery that opened on Memorial Day weekend in 2013. In less than six months they were able to expand into wholesale distribution. In January 2014 the Matthiesens tripled their brewing capacity with additional equipment, after first year sales exceeded expectations. Now, wholesale distribution extends to Des Moines and Council Bluffs, and into South Dakota and Minnesota.

The top seller is the now-famous CocO Chocolate Stout, which is available year-round in both bottles and kegs. The beer has real cocoa nibs, bourbon vanilla beans, imported sugar, and caramel malt. What started off as “an easy-drinking Stout” is now the craft beer everyone is asking about.

The gold medals mean a fast-growing demand for West O CocO Stout. Matthiesen alludes to it, saying “It’s a great honor, but also a great boost for marketing a beer.” West O Marketing Director Lee Shiney expands on that. “A business hopes to have a good product or service, with fans to organically spread the word and solidify the brand. But the lottery-winning-moment, so to speak, is some kind of validation from a higher authority saying ‘hey, you should try this.’ This is that kind of moment.”

Not that they needed the higher authority. Their followers number into the thousands on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and for their email newsletter sent out from www.westobeer.com. Fans regularly make the trek to West Okoboji to fill half-gallon growlers with beer, spend time drinking pints in the West O tasting room, and constantly asking if their favorite beer is available in their favorite locations yet.

What’s on tap for West O’s future is the Matthiesens’ continued plan for slow, steady growth of their business. With demand for CocO Stout increasing weekly, they know that yet another expansion may be on the horizon. Matthiesen says, “we don’t have a firm timeline yet, but we’re likely to have more tanks going into production to handle the increased demand.”

There is one thing that won’t be in West O’s future – resting on their laurels. The entire team knows that a little luck and lots of hard work got them to this point. Matthiesensays “we are going to continue to focus on always trying to improve our process. And we’re going to grow our distribution, both vertically into our existing big markets like Des Moines, as well as pushing further east beyond I-35. This is a big win and great exposure, but we have our work cut out for us.”

###