

LEADING A HISTORICAL BRITISH BREWERY INTO THE FUTURE

South African-born Rob Jacobson cut his teeth brewing macro lagers at SAB, but when the chance arose to work as head brewer in a historical UK brewery, he jumped on a plane and swapped Castle for cask. **Jeff Evans** quizzed him about the move.



Based in the quiet country town of Devizes, Wadworth & Co. is as traditional a British brewery as you can get. It brews mostly cask-conditioned ale, runs its own estate of pubs and even has a team of shire horses that deliver beer around the town. It would be understandable therefore if Rob Jacobson had suffered a little from culture shock when he arrived here as head brewer in 2018.

Rob joined Wadworth from SAB's Newlands Brewery in Cape Town, having previously worked at the Rosslyn Brewery in Pretoria. From a world of mostly huge-volume lager produced in a giant brewhouse, he now sits in the small head brewer's office high in a rambling, red-brick brewery built in 1885. The value of his appointment to Wadworth, which has an eye on the rapidly-changing beer scene in the UK, is clear. "It was important for us not just to get a technically-qualified brewer but somebody who gets the consumer bit and understands that what we brew has got to be sold and be relevant to the market," says chief executive Chris Welham. But what was the lure for Rob?

"I had been with SAB for a number of years and was nearing a point where I would take on a brewing manager's role within a big brewery," he explains. "Having been through a number of

different roles, from technical through to management, I was quite keen on taking a broader spectrum of work – raw materials right the way through to packaging. With the way roles are specialised in SAB, that wouldn't have been possible at the time." It seemed a good time to broaden horizons. "I was recently married and, between myself and my wife, we were very keen on the opportunity to travel and work abroad," he says.

He's also pushing the innovation button with a continuous series of experimental brews

OLD TECHNIQUES, NEW CHALLENGES

They settled on the UK as the ideal destination and things then moved very quickly. "From a brewer's perspective, it's really exciting to have done large-scale commercial brewing but now to also be able to work in a completely different market space," says Rob. "The UK's

independent regional brewers produce a different style of beer – cask ale – which you won't find as widespread anywhere else in the world. To be able take on a more senior role with a much wider scope of work, and seeing the change that Wadworth was going through, it just seemed like the right decision."

Brewing cask-conditioned ale, which contains live yeast and enjoys a secondary fermentation in the cask when it reaches the pub cellar, is certainly a different brewing experience to producing filtered, pressurised lagers, but Rob quickly adapted. "In principle, everything's very similar. For me it's around following a process and having systems is really important. There was obviously some learning but that was part of the excitement in the move. The team here is unbelievable. I was received with open arms and where I had gaps those have been filled really quickly."

So what changes has Rob brought to Wadworth? Well, a fresh eye on procedures for a start. "Something we've done over the last two years is look at all of our standard operating practices," he says. "We would question if they are up to date. Could things be done better? How do we start challenging what we are doing? This is always against the backdrop of how can we do that without fundamentally changing what we are."

VERDANT IPA

ALE YEAST



SELECTED BY
VERDANT
BREWING CO.

FERMENTATION RANGE
18 to 23°C (64.4 to 73.4°F)

FLOCCULATION
Medium to High

ALCOHOL TOLERANCE
12% ABV

ATTENUATION
Medium to high

LALBREW® VERDANT IPA has been selected in collaboration with Verdant Brewing Co. for its unique sensory characteristics. It is a pure culture strain of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. It results in an increased mouthfeel, high aromatic intensity of fresh fruit, with very light and softly balanced palate. **LALBREW® VERDANT IPA** is suitable for production of modern IPA styles with tropical fruit qualities from late and dry hop additions.

LalBrew® PREMIUM SERIES

Distributed by Beerguevara (500g packs) and Beerlab (11g sachets)
Contact Rep. Jacques at jjansevanrensborg@lallemand.com for further details

www.lallemandbrewing.com

LALLEMAND



A LITTLE HISTORY

Wadworth is one of Britain's historic family breweries, based in Wiltshire in the south-west of England. It was founded in 1875 by Henry Wadworth, who built today's brewery in Devizes in 1885. Its most famous beer, 6X, was first brewed in 1923 and today Wadworth operates more than 150 pubs, most of them close to its home town. Charles Bartholomew, a great-grandson of Henry Wadworth's brother-in-law and business partner John Smith Bartholomew, remains as non-executive chairman of the company.



CORONA CURVEBALL

One such initiative was the new tasting panel he has set up. "Within quality assurance we didn't have a trained taste panel. We had people who were probably very good but not formally trained. I thought that was a great opportunity to get people engaged in the brewery, so we looked also toward the wider support staff," Rob says. A team was selected and trained in sensory analysis. They now meet once a week to discuss and dissect the beers. "From there, the brewers review and say 'Right, where are the opportunities? How do we get better?' It's all about challenging ourselves again towards continuous improvement."

Earlier this year, Wadworth revealed plans to leave its ageing Victorian brewhouse and move to a new purpose-built site elsewhere in Devizes. Those plans have been placed on indefinite hold because of the Coronavirus crisis but the equipment in current use, while in some areas getting a little creaky, is still totally functional.

"We manage to produce some great beers. We've got some pretty fancy silverware so it can be done," says Rob. "We've got amazing engineers and amazing brewers and the combined experience really gets us to a place where we are able to produce great beer on a consistent basis. So where we do have potentially some challenges with old kit, we've got great people to make sure that we can manage that."

MARRYING INNOVATION AND TRADITION

Much of Rob's time involves the

production of the core range of ales, and primarily the well-known best bitter, 6X. But part of his remit is to respond to the market and so he's also pushing the innovation button with a continuous series of experimental brews. "Something that we've done is put some focus on new product development," he says. "We did have seasonals but we're really trying to supercharge that, so we have what I call a feeder programme. Every month we produce some bespoke beer on the microbrewery that's two and a half barrels (409 litres). That goes down to one of our pubs for consumer feedback. We use different adjuncts, different raw materials, potentially different yeasts. We've done a range of different things that we would have never done previously. What I'm trying to work toward is creating a portfolio that we are ready to draw on so that when we see the opportunity to start launching new stuff, it's there and ready to go."

That's all part of the joy of brewing in England for Rob. While appreciating what is historic and traditional, he's very much part of the future of Wadworth, helping to take the company into a new age and securing its future, as he sees it, for the next 50–100 years. That said, Rob continues to keep an eye on what's happening in his homeland. "My heart is very much tied to South Africa and the friends and family who live there," says Rob. "I definitely keep a lateral eye on what's happening within the industry and quietly drop into the odd taproom to try out the beers when I'm back." And who knows, perhaps one day he'll bring his recently acquired knowledge from a historical brewery to introduce some new, old concepts to the South African scene. 🍻