



Beer of the Month Club

This Month's Featured Brews



Big Sky Brewing Company

From the very beginning, the beer was the thing.

Big Sky Brewing Company was started by Neal Leathers, Bjorn Nabozney, and Brad Robinson. Brad and Neal had been home-brewers in Michigan since the mid 1980's, and had moved to Missoula with a group of friends in the summer of 1990. In the early '90s they worked at Sportsmen's Surplus and High Country Sports where they met Bjorn. One of Brad's first nights in Missoula was spent at the old Iron Horse when it was attached to Bayern Brewing Company down at the end of Higgins Avenue. He was impressed by Bayern's lagers, but felt that there was room in Missoula for a second brewery; and since Neal and Brad specialized in brewing English style ales he felt that an ale brewery would be producing very different beers than Bayern Brewing Company did. Neal agreed, and the two began to work on starting up a brewery.

Their first step was to produce and "star" in a series on MCAT called Beer Talk. The show consisted of Brad and Neal tasting various beers, usually microbrews or imports, and commenting on what they liked and did not like about them. The program immediately set viewership records and led to many of the most successful call-in programs in MCAT's history. If nothing else, Beer Talk showed a lot of Missoulians that Brad and Neal were passionate about beer! Unfortunately, neither of the two had much business experience, nor did they have a lot of local connections. That is where Bjorn entered the picture.

Bjorn was just finishing his B.A. in finance at the University of Montana. As a final project he was assigned to write a business plan. He chose to write up a plan for the brewery that Brad and Neal had been babbling about for a couple of years, and it was that business plan that really got the ball rolling towards making Big Sky Brewing Company a reality. Bjorn, Brad, and Neal took that plan to local attorneys, accountants, and bankers. They rewrote and improved it numerous times and finally went out to find investors. Bjorn is a native Montanan and he knew a lot of local business people.

Also, both he and Brad are great salesmen, so while Neal stayed at home and brewed test batches of beer, Bjorn and Brad went out and raised capital. After about a year and a half, Big Sky Brewing Company had enough cash in the bank and a large enough bank loan to begin purchasing equipment and renovating its original location at 120-A Hickory Street.

They brewed their first batch of beer, Whistle Pig Red Ale, in mid-June of 1995 and hit the market with it just in time for the 4th of July weekend. A couple of months later, Moose Drool Brown Ale and Scape Goat Pale Ale followed, and Big Sky Brewing Company was on its way.

The company was a draft only brewery (no bottled beer) for its first five and a half years. They brewed everything on Hickory Street, but they realized that to really become a regional player they had to find a way to put their beer into bottles. The Hickory Street brewery was not nearly large enough to allow for bottling, so they began working toward building a new brewery. While they were raising funds for the new brewery, they worked out an arrangement to brew their beers at Portland Brewing Company a few days a month. Then Portland Brewing Company bottled their

beers and shipped them out to their distributors. Finally, in early 2002 they broke ground on a new brewery on Trumpeter Lane just north of the airport. They began brewing in the new brewery in September of 2002 and started bottling their beer there in January of 2003. Since then, they have been where they always wanted to be, brewing and packaging all of their beer right in Missoula.

Fortunately for them, they're brewing a lot of great beer now! They sell their beers in thirteen states: Montana, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, California, Nevada, Colorado, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Montana is still their #1 state for sales.

Neal and Brad were students at Michigan State University in the 1980's. During a couple of summers, they traveled with friends to Alaska to work in the fishing industry. Both trips consisted of buying the cheapest van that seemed dependable in town, loading it up with friends, and driving to Alaska. Those trips passed through Oregon and Washington where microbreweries were just starting to really get going, and Brad and Neal fell in love with the flavorful brews they discovered on those trips. Their favorite beer was probably Chinook Amber Ale (now known as Alaskan Amber) from the Alaska brewing company. When they returned from Alaska, they took up home-brewing as a hobby and have been brewers ever since. As Big Sky Brewing Company has grown larger, they've hired brewers with more scientific backgrounds, so their beers continue to be that mix of art and science that lets them continue to brew on the wild side, but also makes sure that their beers are consistently high quality brews. Neal passed on the title as head brewer to Matt Long back in the late 90's and Matt has led the Big Sky brew crew ever since.

When they first starting looking at naming their beers, they knew that they wanted to use Montana critters as their theme. They had Bjorn's Mom Jane doing artwork for them and they told her to paint a bear, a moose, a marmot, a buffalo, a fox, a mountain goat, etc. Then they would look at the paintings and try to come up with memorable names to go with the images. The most famous of their brands, Moose Drool, came out of that process. Bjorn and Brad were looking at Jane's painting of a moose lifting his head from a pond with water streaming off of his muzzle. Neal walked past, and seeing the painting for the first time immediately suggested "it's a moose, he's drooling, let's call it moose drool."

Moose Drool is chocolate brown in color with a creamy texture. A malty beer with just enough hop presence to keep it from being too sweet. The aroma mostly comes from the malt with a hint of spice added by the hops. Moose Drool is brewed with pale, caramel, chocolate, and whole black malts; and Kent Goldings, Liberty, and Willamette hops.

Scape Goat is their gold medal award-winning Pale Ale. It is a very smooth brew, refreshing and well-balanced, brewed with pale, crystal malts, and Kent Goldings and Crystal Hops.

Powder Hound Winter Ale is what they call a *Northern Rockies Strong Ale* and is brewed only in the winter months. Rich malt taste and an avalanche of hopes will make you want to say "I'll have another Powder Hound!"