

Cheers! Brewpub at Momo's is worth celebrating

— Doug Blackburn

Momo's long has been a beer lover's destination. It's the best watering hole north of Midtown and, truly, a worthy rival to any beer bar in Tallahassee.

I have been so impressed with the dozen-plus craft beers on tap at Momo's that two years ago I titled a blog about the Market Square restaurant, "Momo's also serves pizza."

Momo's craft beer offerings, it turns out, were only appetizers for a delicious entree. Owner Donny Dye has transformed his north-side pizzeria into a brewpub, Tallahassee's first since Buckhead Brewery closed its doors almost a decade ago.

It's a terrific addition to the drinking life in our town, and as I reflect on 2011 — "the beer in review" — it is hands down No. 1 on the list of significant developments.

Beer enthusiasts know that good beer, unlike good wine, is meant to be enjoyed fresh and as close to the source as possible.

I am happy to report that the suds seeping out of the tap handles at Momo's are fine beers, a credit to the craft beer revolution that took hold nationwide almost 20 years ago. The porter, which went back on tap last week, is my favorite of the eight or so styles offered to date. It is divine, full-bodied and perfectly balanced, better than any pint of Fuller's Pride I've had in this country.

While Dye is passionate about craft beer — he also continues to offer a solid lineup of regional and national ales — much of the credit for the house beers goes to John Larsen, co-owner with his wife, Sarah Bridegroom, of the Homebrew Den around the corner from Momo's. Dye has hired the FSU business school professor to be the brewmaster, and Larsen has not been overwhelmed going from five-gallon batches to 90 gallons at a shot.

"I knew John had the knowledge and, more importantly, the desire to do it right," Dye told me. "He's always approached it from the standpoint that it had to be done right, and I think that's been the difference-maker."

Larsen admits it's not the same as brewing at home, where an experiment gone awry is simply a small write-off. It's also proven to be a lot of work.

"What's surprised me the most is how much time I spend doing things other than brewing," he said. "I kind of knew

that was true with home brewing, but the scale is so much bigger and the stakes are so much bigger. You spend a lot of time cleaning your equipment."

Dye installed the three-barrel brew system in an area previously occupied by a catering company. One entire cooler is now devoted to kegs of Momo's own beers, waiting to go on tap.

Dye and Larsen are well aware that not everyone in Tallahassee has developed a fondness for exotic styles or hoppy India pale ales, and they are rolling out light, accessible ales that should appeal to the Big Beer drinker willing to try a local product. There's a cream ale on tap right now that should please fans of light beers, and Larsen is getting ready to make a kolsch, a German-style light, crisp lager that also could be a "gateway beer."

Larsen said, "Not all of the beers I'm going to make are going to be big and extreme. Most of them won't be. I want people to know craft beer can be many things."

Dye bought all-new equipment for his brewery, a decision that he believes will pay off in the long run. His license does not allow him to sell growlers — brewpub-speak for to-go containers — nor is he allowed to take kegs to his other restaurant, the original Momo's on West Tennessee Street.

Dye hasn't done any advertising to promote the brewery within the pizzeria. He doesn't believe in it.

But word-of-mouth and social media are bringing new customers into the Market Square eatery, beer lovers who are eager to try the house ales.

"It's nice that people have an option for locally brewed beer that's as good as any beer brewed in the country," Dye said.

Let's raise a glass to that.