

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

Granville Island Brewery's focus helps it remain strong

The secret of survival in an industry dominated by large corporate brewers is to be original and avoid trying to emulate them, marketing director says

BY BRIAN MORTON
VANCOUVER SUN

How does a small niche company maintain its unique brand after becoming part of a larger conglomerate?

It's often a tough challenge, but Granville Island Brewing — which this year celebrates its 25th anniversary — believes it's found the way to do just that.

"It can be difficult," marketing and sales director Walter Cosman said in an interview. "But I think the critical point is to always maintain the integrity of the original passion and brand. Sometimes [companies] evolve into something that they shouldn't have ended up as."

Cosman cited the company's continued use of wooden signs, rather than neon signage, as one way the brewery maintains its craft image.

According to a news release, the company was started up as Canada's first microbrewery 25 years ago by Mitch Taylor, who wanted to create a premium, all-natural unpasteurized beer similar to the famous German pilsners. The company was sold to Potters Spirits in 1989. Today, it is owned by Andrés Wines Ltd.

The company's handcrafted beer lineup, inspired by the West Coast lifestyle and named after West Coast landmarks, includes its English Bay Pale Ale (originally Lord Granville Pale Ale), Cypress Honey Lager, Robson Street Hefeweizen and



BILL KEAY/VANCOUVER SUN

Walter Cosman (right), marketing and sales director of Granville Island Brewing, and Vern Lambourne (brewmaster) in Vancouver.

Gastown Amber Ale. The brewery uses Canadian barley malt and imported malts, along with "the finest blend of European and Pacific Northwest hops, special yeasts and, of course, fresh B.C. water."

Cosman, who is also co-director of the B.C. Craft Brewers As-

sociation, said the brewery is still run independently. "Although we have ownership tied to a larger winery, we're left as a stand-alone business to manage and run."

He said innovation and quality are central to their brewing. "We were the first brewery to do a

hefeweizen, a German-style wheat beer, in a big way. And we relate better to local consumers."

Cosman said the secret to surviving in a world of large corporate brewers is to avoid trying to emulate them.

"When we're looking at beer

trends, we look north-south, as against east-west. We look at West Coast drinkers, who enjoy full-flavoured craft beers. Portland and Seattle are two of the largest microbrewing markets in North America."

He said the brewery got its idea for its latest beer, Brockton

Granville Island Brewing Company

Website: www.gib.ca

Year formed: 1984

Number of employees: 60

Total retail sales in 2008: \$17.2 million

Total retail sales in 2001: \$8.5 million

Number of ingredients used in its brewing process: four

IPA, a "golden-coloured, well-hopped and refreshing India Pale Ale," at the U.S. Craft Brewers Festival in Seattle in 2004. It's named after the Brockton Oval in Stanley Park.

Despite watching trends closely, Cosman said organic beers aren't in the brewery's future. "We use all natural ingredients. [But] we don't think there's [enough] consumer demand in the marketplace."

Cosman said aspiring entrepreneurs should also focus on service if they want to compete with larger established companies.

"We over-deliver on service, from next-day deliveries to understanding the local market regarding sponsorships."

The brewery is co-sponsoring the Dragon Boat Festival, the World Police & Fire Games 2009 and the Vancouver International Jazz Festival.

bmorton@vancouver.sun.com

Vancouver Sun, May 6, 2009

For Jive Communications (www.jivecommunications.ca)

Client: Granville Island Brewing