

MORGANTON, N.C. — When Seth and Emily Murray opened a taproom last June in Morganton's central business district, they had plans to someday grow it into a brewery. They didn't realize "someday" would come less than a year later.

On April 14, Sidetracked Taproom officially became Sidetracked Brewery. The accelerated business plan was made possible by Morganton's growing appreciation of craft beer and a partnership with veteran brewer Joseph Ackerman.

"It was always my philosophy to do a brewery, but not really in the short term," said Seth Murray. "It seems like once we came in, people have been talking about this explosion of growth in downtown Morganton. We heard so many people talking about it and wanted to be a part of it."

The Murrays and Ackerman began converting the taproom into a brewery in January. It required a build-out of the front wall at their location on South Green Street to create space for a 5-barrel brewing system that is visible from the street.

Ackerman had been involved in the start-up of a craft brewery and head brewer at another, so his experience led to a smooth transition. The new brewery debuted in April with six railroad-themed beers. It will typically have 12-14 railroad-themed beers on tap, all brewed in-house.

The theme comes from Sidetracked's proximity to the Morganton Railway Depot Museum and the train tracks that brought prosperity to Morganton a century ago.

So far, the six flagship beers are the Cross Tie Brown, Whistleblower Sour, Light Rail Blonde, Thomas the Dank Engine New England IPA, Bessemer Process Pale Ale and the Weizenbahn Hefeweizen. The Bessemer Process was the first affordable steel-producing process that made railways possible, while Weizenbahn is a German term that means wheat railway.

"It's nice to have a theme," Ackerman said. "We have a dictionary of railroad terms and just flip through the pages."

Ackerman's philosophy is brewing high-quality traditional beers for the local market. His interest is keenly local, not distributing across North Carolina or the Southeast. To that end, he stressed to the Murrays that the business name should be "brewery" and not "brewing company."

"I want people to enjoy our product enough to want to come here, to build a community around this place," said Ackerman. "I want every single beer that we put on tap to be world-class in quality. Hopefully, when we start entering competitions, it will reflect that."

While Ackerman will get creative from time to time with small batches, the Sidetracked idea is to do recognizable beers that are very drinkable. To that end, he makes a flagship IPA in the New England style which is less bitter than traditional West Coast style IPAs.

There's virtually no bitterness to it, he said. "It explores a different aspect of the hops."

Sidetracked Brewery has just over 3,000 square feet of space. A warm interior is designed with wood, iron and metal, including footrails made from vintage railroad irons. There is a ping-pong room at the back, as well as a covered back patio overlooking a courtyard.

Ackerman and the Murrays give credit to Morganton's two pioneering downtown breweries, Catawba and Fonta Flora, for creating the environment that allowed Sidetracked to chug into town.

"We are filling a niche in Morganton and rounding out the beer selection in town," Ackerman said.

Sidetracked Brewery is open five days a week. Hours are 3-10 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday and 1-11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. The brewery occasionally hosts live music on weekends.

For more info, call 828-544-5840 or go to www.SidetrackedBrew.com.

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