

Economist & Sun • Stouffville Tribune

SAVOUR

Humble brown bottle gets new following

The dawn of a new beer age

BY JENNIFER BROWN
STAFF WRITER

Move over oenophiles, tastings and tours are no longer just for lovers of the grape.

As small craft breweries expand their product lines and beer drinkers experiment with dark beers, stout, lagers and ales, the humble brown bottle has found a new following.

With more than 23 craft breweries in Ontario, all with a unique taste and style, beer connoisseurs are starting to give the big brewers a run for their money.

The art of craft brewing means beer is created in small quantities with no preservatives.

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York Region's Magnotta Wines opened its first brewery in Scarborough in 1996 and four months ago opened its second in a large state-of-the-art facility in Vaughan, which has the capacity to make 800,000 litres of beer annually.

Magnotta offers five different beers and two different product lines — the True North, which includes lager, lite, cream ale and a strong beer, as well as a line of Magnotta Classic European Styles, such as traditional altbier, and soon-to-be-released India Pale Ale.

The altbier (alt meaning old, pre-dating lager beer styles) is a top-fermented ale given a period of cold aging to establish a crisp, smooth character. And Magnotta is sparing nothing in its search for the traditional beer style — head brewer Mike Ligas brought back a strain of yeast for the beer from Dusseldorf, Germany.

'I defy any chef to match a wine with a hot curry dish. But any heavily hopped traditional English pale ale would be perfect.'

• MIKE LIGAS,
Magnotta brewer

The end product features a light brown color with a rich maltiness and intense-hop flavor and bitterness.

"We're aiming to make the beers according to the style they were made in their heyday three to four centuries ago," said Ligas, adding he also wants to educate the public about classic beer styles.

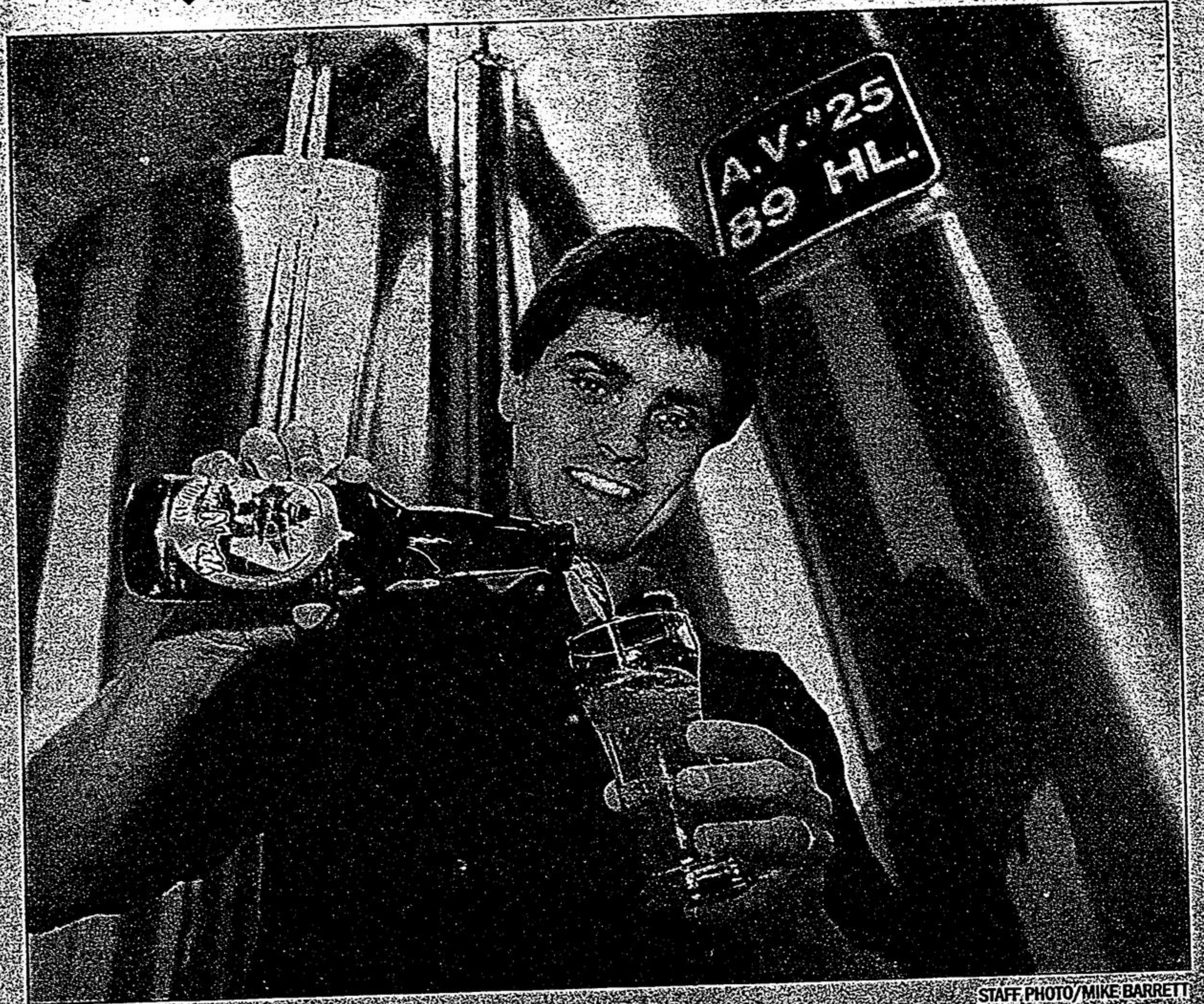
"Many people think beer should be a pale straw color and cold and that's just not the case. We want to promote an air of customer knowledge and appreciation of the beverage," Ligas said, adding he wants people to learn to marry beer with food, pointing out the options are unlimited.

"I defy any chef to match a wine with a hot curry dish. But any heavily hopped traditional English pale ale would be perfect."

Ligas says demographics are also driving the interest in specialty beers.

"We have an aging population with more disposable income. And as we get older, it's not how much we drink, but the quality of it. So rather than running off to a party with a 12-pack, their taste is becoming more discerning," said Ligas. "But when they come here to try something, I let the customer decide."

Magnotta usually holds beer



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Mike Ligas of Magnotta Winery is working to enhance beer's image as a beverage by brewing a number of specialty products that appeal to discerning drinkers.

tastings as part of a special event at the winery and will introduce consumers not only to the product, but also the ingredients that make a beer unique.

Both Magnotta and Woodbridge Brewery of Vaughan are now brewing beer to rival the imports. At Woodbridge Brewery — affiliated with Cilento Wines —

three distinct beers have been made for the last three years. The Arctic Gold is a European Pilsner, while the White Star is an India Pale Ale and the Europa is a Viennese Red Lager.

"Microbrewing is very popular now and people are getting away from traditional domestic beers and trying something new," said owner Grace Locicento.

Another sign that attitudes toward beer are changing is the emergence of The Ale Trail in southwestern Ontario — a self-guided tour of six breweries that sprung up this spring in the Waterloo-Wellington area of southern Ontario, a 90-minute drive from York Region.

Taking a cue from the popularity of Niagara-On-The-Lakes wine tours, The Ale Trail celebrates craft beer and the province's history of brewing, as well as Canadian twists on old country favorites.

For example, the Old Mill produces Canada's only rye beer, while F & M makes Ontario's only honey

wheat beer. Gold Crown puts a modern spin on old English and European favorites.

On select Sundays, visitors can sample brews, meet brew masters and tour the operations. About 22 local restaurants, pubs and hotels in the Guelph, Cambridge and Kitchener area have also become part of The Ale Trail.

Recognizing the growing popularity of craft-brewed beers, the beer companies wanted to expand the appreciation for the full flavor of their products and promote the area as a tourist destination.

"Craft brews taste different from large commercially produced beers and this is a way to introduce people to craft brewing," says Mary Cocivera, Ale Trail co-ordinator.

The trail's six craft breweries collectively produce more than 60 different brands of beer, from dark ales to light Pilsners, using traditional techniques, in small batches and using all natural ingredients.

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YORK BREWERIES

Woodbridge Brewery

(Cilento Wines)
300 Trowers Rd., Unit 5,
Woodbridge
Three beers available: Europa
Viennese Red Lager, Arctic Gold,
White Star in 355 mL and 650 mL
sizes.

Magnotta Brewery

271 Chrislea Rd., Woodbridge
1-800-461-9463
(outlets also found in Mississauga,
Scarborough and Kitchener)
Other products available include Ice
Grappa, vodka, gin and beer.



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