



Kings of Beer

A couple of old college
roommates have taken
their dream further than
they ever imagined.

By Chris Gigley



Photography by Mark Wagoner



Chris Lester and Kayne Fisher are about what you'd expect from a couple of guys who own a brewing business. They're amiable and casual; two friends anyone would enjoy hanging out with at a bar all day. And when they visit their flagship location, **Natty Greene's Pub & Brewing Co.**, it's clear they are in their element.

They knew it when they both were still in college at UNC Greensboro in the late '80s.

"We thought, 'Hey, let's open up a bar together,'" says Fisher, in a mock slacker voice. "We could sleep all day, wake up and lift weights and play video games, then go to work at four." Lester laughs. He was the one who suggested to Fisher that they actually follow through with it.

From roughly 1990 to 1994, Lester worked for American Premium Beverage, a beer and wine distributor. He had seen the demand for craft beers grow and tried in vain to sell his accounts — mostly restaurants, bars, and grocery stores — on the idea.

"They had their Bud and Miller and said they didn't need anything else," Lester recalls. "I finally got frustrated. Why wait for someone else to take the opportunity? I thought, 'Let's open a bar that serves nothing but craft beer, all on draft.'"

Thus began the revolution in Greensboro's beer scene, culminating with Fisher and Lester opening Natty Greene's on South Elm Street in 2004. The brewpub serves five core beers — Guilford Golden, Southern Pale Ale, Buckshot Amber Ale, Old Town Brown Ale, and General Stout — and a regular rotation of 26 to 30 seasonal beers that patrons eagerly anticipate.

And as a result, Fisher and Lester have made Greensboro a city of beer snobs.

New Concept at Old Town

Lester and Fisher's first bar was the Old Town Draught House on Spring Garden Street. Lester opened it with another investor in 1996, and invited Fisher north from Florida to check it out.

"I didn't have money to invest at the time," recalls Fisher, who arrived for the Fourth of July holiday. "But Chris asked if I'd bartend for him, and I ended up staying for the rest of the summer."

The pair bartended every night at Old Town, selling patrons on exotic microbrews such as Anchor Steam and Abita — familiar brands today but unknown entities back then. Lester remembers the refrain among the doubters: "They said, 'No Bud Light? You'll never make it.'"

But Old Town had a line snaking out the front door every night, and the duo's charm and salesmanship won over plenty of domestic beer loyalists.

"We converted them through an evolution of craft beer," Fisher says. "We'd start with an Anchor Steam wheat beer, which is a clean, light wheat beer. I'd ask them to try it and offer to buy them a Bud Light if they didn't like it. Six months later, we'd see those people drinking a Guinness. It was fun to see."

"We also told people they were helping the little guy — craft brewers who were doing something they loved and believed in," Lester adds. "Selling that idea, or just making people aware of



it, really got us going." After seeing the potential firsthand, Fisher returned to Florida to tie up loose ends and then settled in Greensboro for good in the fall of 1996.

A year later, he bought out Lester's partner. The pair

then took the Old Town concept to Winston-Salem, where they opened the First Street Draught House in 1998. Two years later, they opened Park Place in Greensboro, which they relaunched as the Tap Room in 2002. Fisher and Lester have since sold all three businesses to focus on Natty Greene's.

"While we were opening these places, Chris would say, 'I love these craft beers, but we should make our own. Let's open our own brewery,'" Fisher says. "I was a little hesitant. One thing we've always prided ourselves on is knowing how to do everything in this business. The thought of brewing beer, which we had no experience in, was a little intimidating."

Baskin-Robbins of Beer

Meanwhile, downtown Greensboro was developing into a dining destination for the Triad. When local businessmen John Lomax and Daniel Craft bought the building at 345 South Elm St., Lomax says he and Craft knew that Lester and Fisher were a perfect fit.

"They're not about making a buck, they're about being good," Lomax says. "That's why Daniel and I got along so well with them. They're good guys and they believe in treating people correctly."

With the site for their new brewpub secured, Fisher and Lester then had to figure out the beer situation.

"We knew we liked hoppy beers, and with the ales you can do a lot," Fisher says.

They found a brewer, Scott Christoffel, who helped them narrow their focus.

"We wanted to get a little edgier than anything that was already being produced," says Christoffel, who came from Left Hand Brewing Company in Colorado. "We also used a more expensive grain from England because we thought it would make a difference. That was our mindset. Let's source the best stuff from all over the world to make our beer distinctive."

Natty Greene's opened in 2004 with four beers — pale, amber, brown, and golden ales. They quickly added the stout and rotated in a seasonal beer on a regular basis. Six more taps poured other brands of craft beers.

"We wanted people to walk in here and feel like they were in Baskin-Robbins," Lester explains. "As a kid you go in there and see all those flavors and say, 'Which one do I want today?' That's what a brewpub should be like."

Natty Greene's was already a huge hit when Greensboro Grasshoppers president and general

manager Donald Moore called Lester and Fisher in 2005. Moore wanted to serve Natty Greene's beer at the team's brand-new ballpark, now called NewBridge Bank Park.

"I didn't think we were ready for it, but I knew we couldn't afford not to take advantage of the opportunity," Lester says. "It was a new stadium opening up in downtown. We were downtown's microbrewery. We had to do it, and that decision has really been a huge part of our success."

Demand exploded, and Lester and Fisher added capacity to brew more beer. Gradually, the six taps reserved for outside microbrews became the exclusive domain of Natty Greene's growing variety of occasional beers. The brewpub had its own beers on all 12 taps all the time.

In Bottles and Beyond

Natty Greene's next phase of growth is already well under way in an old warehouse building on Lee Street. Guilford Golden, Southern Pale Ale, Buckshot Amber, and Old Town Brown are being brewed and bottled there.

Selling bottled beer to Harris Teeter, The Fresh Market, and other retail outlets in the Triad has been a relatively smooth process. Lester's happy and easygoing personality made him plenty of friends when he worked in distribution. That includes grocery store managers. Fisher says many of those managers pledged to add Natty Greene's beer long before he and Lester decided to bottle it.

The actual bottling process, however, has been a challenge. Lester says while brewing beer was an unknown to them when they decided to do it, the actual process is relatively simple.

"But taking a product that's carbonated and fermented, filtering it, then putting it into a 12-ounce bottle under pressure, putting a cap on it, putting a label on it, putting it in a six-pack holder and getting it to the grocery store — that's extremely challenging to say the least," he says. "It's a production line with thousands of moving parts that have to synchronize."

Engineers from the German company that built the machinery have traveled back and forth between Germany and Greensboro to fine-tune it. Now, Fisher and Lester say everything is running smoothly, which leaves them in a familiar position — trying to meet the demand for their beer.

At press time, Lester was working on buying more fermentation tanks so they reach maximum production at Lee Street. Naturally Lester, ever the visionary, is already thinking further into the future. He says he and Fisher will continue to build the Natty Greene's brand in the Triad, but the bottling venture has opened the doors to new markets. Charlotte and Raleigh are already on Lester's radar.

Fisher is even more direct about growth plans. "I'm not going to lie," he says. "I'd love to be North Carolina's brewery one day."

He and Lester may be two guys daydreaming about the future. But then again, that's how this whole thing got started. ●



This spring, look for new bottles from Natty Greene's locally brewed selection.