

Fieldwork Brewing stays frothy with new East Bay taproom

By Alyssa Pereira



Fieldwork Brewing Co. opened its first taproom in Berkeley in 2015 and now has five locations. Photo: Jessica Christian, The Chronicle
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Fieldwork Brewing Co. plans to keep two years of rapid growth hopping by opening another East Bay taproom.

The company opened its first taproom in 2015, in the same building as its Berkeley brewhouse. It now has five locations, and by the end of this year it will have at least six across Northern California.

Such rapid expansion is rare in a state like California, where more than 900 breweries compete for craft drinkers' cash and attention.

"This is what I do every day, and I could not name another brewery that has undergone such rapid growth in that short period of time," said Tom McCormick, executive director of the California Craft Brewers Association, whose members include Fieldwork. "There's no one else I can think of."

The new taproom, announced Tuesday, is scheduled to open in the late fall in the new high-end City Center development at San Ramon's Bishop Ranch. Another site is on the horizon, co-founder Barry Braden said.

The brewery built its reputation on fresh beer — meaning it makes mostly non-barrel-aged and non-soured brews — and a lot of it. Fieldwork distributes kegs to bars around the greater Bay Area, and restricts can sales to its taprooms in Berkeley, Sacramento, San Mateo, Monterey and at Napa's Oxbow Market.

"Everything on the can side is gone pretty quickly at the taproom," Braden said.

Fieldwork holds what's called a type 23 license, meaning it is allowed to have six "duplicate licenses" to operate non-production taprooms in addition to the one co-located with the brewing operation.

As part of the license, up to two of these six "duplicate" locations may also use a kitchen for regular meal services, according to the Alcoholic Beverages Commission in California. Currently, meals are offered in Fieldwork's Sacramento and San Mateo locations.

Fieldwork is hardly the only brewery using duplicate licenses, McCormick said, but it may be the most successful.

"They've really grabbed that business model and put these duplicate license tasting rooms around the region," he said. "They've hit a home run in terms of the success of the tasting rooms, the ambiance, the feel, the attention to detail from servers. Their location in (Berkeley) is busy all the time."

The company brewed 2,700 barrels in 2015, and this year Braden estimates it will reach 18,000 to 20,000 barrels — at which point Fieldwork's production facility will be essentially maxed out.

If Fieldwork opens another location after it uses all six of its duplicate licenses, the owners would need to get another brewing facility, and every location after that "would have to have some kind of brewing on-site," Braden says.

Eventually, the business will have to decide whether to stay the same size, buy another brewing facility or buy other brewing companies, he said.

"We went from eight employees to over 100 now," Braden said. "You have to think about all the stuff that goes along with it — the HR stuff, the legal stuff — and just how you manage a company of that size. We do all our own self-distribution (and) we have six trucks now. How many trucks could we realistically have?"

Deals among craft brewers are not uncommon. Last year, for example, Colorado's New Belgium Brewing Co. (with Belgium's Oud Beersel) acquired San Francisco's Magnolia Brewing Co.

"As the cost of business goes up and the market gets competitive, it makes sense to do these mergers, partnerships and acquisitions because it makes them more efficient," McCormick said. "I think we'll see really creative acquisitions going forward."