

Cheers to the years: Bell's Brewery Inc. to celebrate 25th anniversary with four-day party

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John Liberty | Kalamazoo Gazette



Mark Bugnaski / GazetteBell's Brewery Inc. president Larry Bell at the Eccentric Cafe. Bell's will celebrate its 25th anniversary Sept. 9-12.

KALAMAZOO — As the story goes, at around 10 p.m. on a Saturday night in 1983, musicians Craig Spink, who performs as "Curly Holiday," and Rock Bartley decided to drop by their favorite homebrewers house to pick up some beer for their upcoming roadie.

Most likely out of excitement, the two men arrived at the front door of the house on Merrill Street in Kalamazoo and banged on the door.

On the other end was a petrified homebrewer who assumed the authorities had come to let him know the jig was up.

"The hair goes up on the back of you neck. For some reason, you just get a bad feeling. I thought I was getting busted for my homebrewing activities," Larry Bell said. "You go through the process in your mind of thinking, 'OK, what do you do? Do you jump out the window and run?' Not a good idea. You open the door and you be cordial. I opened the door and it was Rock and Curly saying, 'Hey Larry. We're going on the road and we need a case of that cream stout.'"

The spooked Bell used the night as inspiration to make his hobby a legitimate business.

Later that year, Bell opened a homebrewing supply shop. He sold his first beer on Sept. 19, 1985.



Called Bell's Beer, it sold for \$8 and came in a cubitainer, a one gallon plastic container used mostly in scientific work.

The Cork Screw and Bacchus Wine & Spirits were Bell's first commercial customers. In 1986, Bell's sold 135 barrels.

Since then, Bell's Brewery Inc. has grown to become the largest brewery in the state and one of the biggest players in the nation's growing craft beer movement.

Bell's sold 125,000 barrels last year and is on pace to sell 153,000 barrels this year, Bell said.

If you go

Bell's Brewery Inc.'s 25th anniversary party

What: Specialty beers, food, live music, tours and more **When:** Sept. 9-12

Where: Bell's Eccentric Cafe, 355 E. Kalamazoo Ave. and brewing facility, 8369 Krum Ave., Galesburg

Cost: Free

Contact: 269-382-2332

Connect www.bellsbeer.com

*Read more about the **Eccentric Cafe renovations and some of Bell's specialty beers.***

[Anniversary schedule](#)



Prost!: The Kalamazoo German band Ein Prosit will play at 1 p.m. Sept. 11 at the Bell's Brewery Inc.'s 25th anniversary celebration. The members of the band, shown here performing last year, are, from left, Phil Hahn, John Griffith, Jan Solberg and Judy Koenig.

Sept. 9

9:30 p.m.: West Side Winders, rockabilly, surf, free

Sept. 10

3 p.m.: Music begins, with The Kalamazoo Dixieland Band; Great Lakes Grass, Kalamazoo bluegrass; Black Jake & the Carnies, Ypsilanti "crabgrass" band, and Greensky Bluegrass, Kalamazoo bluegrass, throughout the day and night, free

Other: \$1 off pints until 9 p.m. for those wearing Bell's gear — "If you've got something old break it out. If it still fits, break it out, show it off," Larry Bell said.

Sept. 11

11 a.m.-4 p.m.: Galesburg brewery will be open to the public for tours, with grilled food and soda available.

1-4 p.m.: Bell's celebrates homebrewers. Bring your five-gallon carboy to the Eccentric Cafe and Bell's staff will fill it with cold, unhopped wort made with Michigan Barley, free; homebrewers can take it home, brew their own batch and submit two bottles by Nov. 1 for judging, winners announced at All Stouts Day, Nov. 7 (limit one per person)

1 p.m.: Music begins with Ein Prosit, a traditional German band; Deal's Gone Bad, Chicago reggae, rock; Rolling Head, Kalamazoo rock band; and My Dear Disco, Ann Arbor dance-rock band, throughout the day and night, free

Other: \$1 off pints until 9 p.m. for those wearing Bell's gear

Sept. 12

Other: Other: \$1 off pints until 9 p.m. for those wearing Bell's gear

It's distributed from Arizona to North Carolina and the Upper Peninsula to Puerto Rico.

Its portfolio boasts 19 brands, including the popular wheat ale Oberon and the India Pale Ale Two-Hearted.

In April, Boulder, Colo.-based Brewers Association ranked Bell's as the nation's 19th brewery, based on sales.

That's in the company of major brewers Anheuser-Busch InBev and MillerCoors Brewing Co.

Bell's will celebrate its 25th anniversary Sept. 9-12 with live music, specialty beers, food, tours, discounts and, in a nod to Bell's beginnings, a homebrewing contest.

In the midst of the silver anniversary celebration, Bell's is undergoing a \$3 million renovation to its downtown Eccentric Cafe, which will receive a new music room, a transformed Beer Garden, new patio and a new entry way, among other upgrades.

As Bell reflected last week on the 25th anniversary, his old friends — Bartley and Spink — worked on the mezzanine, using wood from a Kalamazoo sawmill, in what will be the new music room.

As with previous projects, Bell recruited longtime friends and area craftsmen for most of the work, including Kalamazoo's Mike Bragagnini who will make the fountain for the atrium.



Mark Bugnaski / GazetteBalancing beam: Builder Rock Bartley stands on top of what will be the mezzanine in the new music room at Bell's Eccentric Cafe. Bartley also plays with the band Great Lakes Grass, which will perform at the 25th anniversary party.