



Behind The Brew

By Layla Joseph

North Country Brewing Company is a household name in Slippery Rock, PA. The local business consists of three locations: The Harmony Inn, North Country Brew Pub, and the Taproom. North Country Brewing Company values not only their product but also their employees and community. At North Country Taproom, they not only have a restaurant, but they also brew and package their own specialty beer. The Taproom also hosts *Growing Together Aquaponic Program*, where they provide job-training skills to people with disabilities leading to integrated employment. The plants that they grow through this program are then delivered and served at the Taproom, The Harmony Inn, and the Brew Pub. As well as the *Growing Together* program, they also team up with Slippery Rock University Students in their *Rock Life* program where the students lead lessons and let community members work hands-on and learn all about aquaponics! The company is best known for its unique branding, beer, food, and family like atmosphere.

North Country Canning and Taproom was established in 2013, and is located a stone's skip away from North Country Brew Pub, on Arrowhead Drive in Slippery Rock. This establishment is unique because it is home to three businesses in one location. On Friday, April 23rd, I got the honor to get up close and personal look specifically at how the magic happens behind the scenes of these colorfully packaged and uniquely flavored beers as well as talk to employees about their experiences and lives since joining the North Country "Brew Crew."



Jeff Thompson, a 13 year cannery veteran, and Henry Thornton, who has been with the company for two years, are looking at the day's agenda so that they can get to work. Today they will be making and canning signature recipes from the company's Sour Series.

Henry is loading grain into a chute so that they can start processing and filtering it. The grain travels from the machine he is standing to the machine to the left through a series of chutes.

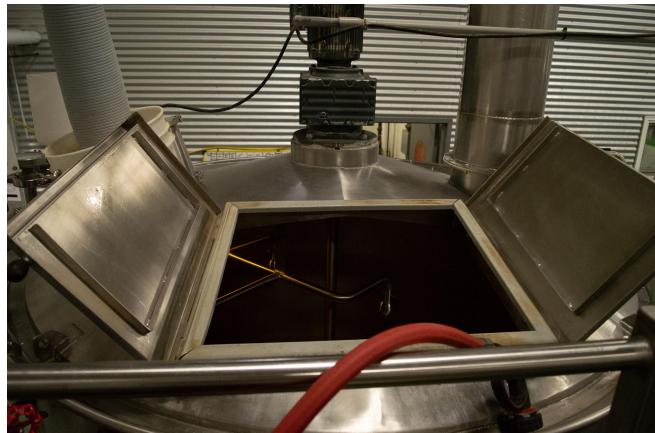




The grain falls from the chute and into the grist case so that it can be weighed and inspected. After the weigh in and inspection, it will go through another series of chutes and be gradually placed into the mash tun, where it will begin the mashing process.

Here is the mash tun where the grain is mixed with hot water and stirred at different speeds so that the grain can break down.

The starch grains are broken up with enzymes and turned into sugars.



At North Country Brewing Company, they have many different and unique beers that require different ingredients. For this beer, Blueberry Cobbler Sour, they use graham crackers, cinnamon, and 1000 lbs of blueberry pure. The man adding the graham cracker crumbs is the Head Brewery at the cannery, Jon Barnes, who says his favorite thing about working at the cannery is “when [he’s] first trying a new recipe and it is exactly how [he] envisioned it.”

Hot water, grain, cinnamon, and graham cracker crumbs are being steeped in together to create a malty, sugary liquid. The steeping process is important to extract the flavors and colors for the grains and added ingredients.



Henry is taking a look at the control panel that has information for all of the tanks in use. Here he is checking and recording the temperatures of different tanks.

After the grains, special ingredients, and hot water are steeped together they make a liquid called wort. The grain is removed and filtered from the wort and dumped into the bin on the pallet jack.





Here the grain is falling into the bin so that it can be disposed of. However, the local company does not throw it out. Instead they give back to the community by giving the leftover grain to a local farmer so that he can feed his livestock.

The wort is then moved to the kettle where bacteria is added to give the beer a special sour taste, then the wort is boiled so that the bacteria is killed. After the death of the bacteria, the wort is cooled and placed into the fermenter with yeast, which eats the sugars and produces alcohol. The giant tanks pictured are fermenters, which after a few days of patience, turns wort into a unique sour beer.



Jeffery is using a jacklift to take all of the empty, lidless cans and place them into the assembly machine. The machine will then lift the cans to the top where they will be brought down again so they can be filled and assembled.

After the cans are brought to the top of the assembly machine, Jeffery adjusts them so that they can fall down smoothly. The cans are pushed through continuously until there are no more cans on the pallet, then the process will repeat until the employees meet their quotas for the day.



Empty cans are being filled with the Prickly Pear Sour, that holds a pink tint. They move through the assembly line, the rods holding them in place before being filled with the sour.

The cans that are now filled with Prickly Pear Margarita are going through the assembly machine. Here, the top of the cans are being sealed to keep the beers well perceived, as they are now officially canned.



Shannon Kenyon has been getting to know the cannery for about a year now, pictured she is adjusting the labels so that the cans can flow through the assembly line. When Shannon is not working to get the beer table ready, she can often be found behind the lens of her own camera.

Now that the can has been filled, sealed, and labeled, you have a finished product that is ready to drink at any moment. The design is custom made by Andy Hamilton, a Slippery Rock Alumni with a degree in Communication Graphic Design.



The cans are being taken off of the assembly line when finished where they are grouped together by fours with plastic pack rings that are added by hand. Next to Austin, who is packaging the beer, lays his cellphone which is playing Brockhampton over the speaker while he works.



Some cans don't get labeled properly due to error of the machine, when this happens employees either put the can back in the assembly line or decide to sample the product. Austin decided to take part in quality control, and get a taste of it for himself.