

# Lifestyle

## Urban Knaves of Grain

### Home-brew club quenches thirst for the perfect beer

By Kathleen Cantwell  
Staff writer

When Bolingbrook resident Joe Formanek wants some of the best beer and ale in the Midwest, he doesn't have to go any farther than his own basement. Recently, for the fourth year in a row, he was named Midwest Homebrewer of the Year by the American Homebrewers Association. A home-brewer since 1988, Formanek is also a board member of the Urban Knaves of Grain, one of about 10 home-brew clubs registered with the AHA in the Chicago area.

And the award isn't the result of a popularity contest, said UKG treasurer Darrell Proksa of Downers Grove. It's hard to win — earned by racking up the most points in a year's worth of competitions.

"Almost everyone in our club aspires to brew as well as Joe does," UKG member Phil Gravel of Lisle said.

Improving their brews is, in fact, the key reason most of the club's 50 or 60 members join — that and the camaraderie. Many of the club's members have won awards and the club itself was a co-winner of the 1999 American Homebrewers Association Club of the Year award.

"Clubs are the best way to get first-hand knowledge — better than reading it in a book," Proksa said, though the club does maintain a library for members.

Club members have trained palates, or have already dealt with a problem another member is encountering.

"You can get feedback — 'Try changing your grain to this' or 'using more hops,'" he said. "You can't get that from a book."

"It's probably kept me in the hobby," Gravel added. When he joined seven or eight years ago in the club's early days, he was "not entirely happy" with the quality of the beer he was making.

Like others, he also enjoys the fellowship and sharing his brews with others.

Jason Ebel of Geneva and his brother Jim are still members of the club, though at this point they've taken their brewing out of the home as owners of Two Brothers Brewing Co. in Warrenville. Two Brothers opened in 1996 and now sells 10 beers in the keg or bottle at 150 locations throughout DuPage, Kane and Cook counties.

"It's a great little community," Jason Ebel said of UKG. "They all share knowledge and ideas on how to do things."

The two brothers also own one of the two home-brewing supply stores in the western suburbs. The Brewers Coop in Warrenville, which they started in 1993 because they had a hard time finding supplies.

In fact, it is through the two home-brewing supply stores — The Brewers Coop and Home-Brew Shop in St. Charles — that the club gets most of its new members.

But why start home-brewing in the first place?

**Art and science**  
"A lot of the time, they become home-brewers because they appreciate the microbrew-quality beers," said Ed Seaman, owner of Home Brew Shop. He has been a home-brewer for about 10 years and used to be an assistant brewer at Glen Ellyn Microbrewery.

"Most of the brewmasters in the area were home-brewers to begin with," he said. "I almost went that direction myself."

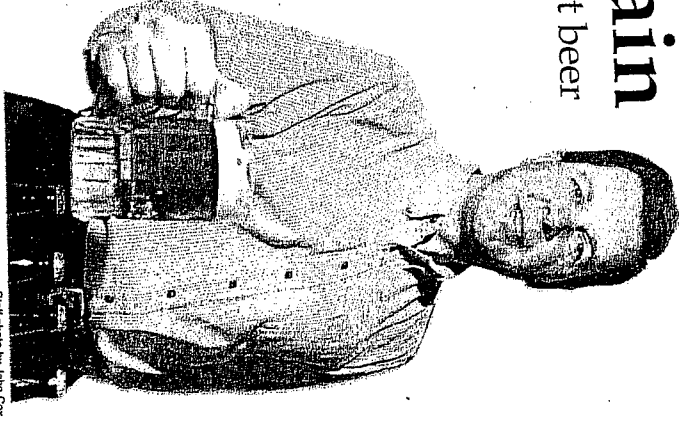
For Formanek and Gravel, both scientists, it was the scientific side of brewing that was some of its appeal.

Formanek is a research scientist at a food company, has a doctorate in food microbiology and used to teach brewing at the University of Illinois in Urbana.

"I personally got into it because of my micro background — making something good through microbiology," he said. "I baked bread too."

Gravel's background as a chemist made him very comfortable with many of the techniques involved in home-brewing. He also likes cooking. Formanek thinks a lot of home-brewers are what he refers to as "foodies."

"If you can appreciate a good, home-brew beer, you can also really appreciate better food," he said.



Staff photo by Jean Dea

Darrell Proksa of Downers Grove shows off the healthy head on his home-brewed English ale.

Proksa also emphasized the food-brew connection.

"Home-brewing is a lot of tasting — it's a little like cooking," he said. "So I would say we have a lot of master chefs in our club."

"(It's) the experimenting and the trying that I enjoy," Gravel said. He likes looking through recipe books, formulating recipes.

Formanek enjoys experimenting too.

"Myself, I develop pretty much my own recipes," he said. "I'm more of — a 'hophend' is what they're called — they like all the different aspects of the hops. I like the bitterness, the flavor and the aroma of hops."

"It's finding those interesting flavor combinations in beer and food that make them delectable."

**A discriminating palate**

Seaman thinks that discriminating palate is a common characteristic of many home-brewers, who also tend to be over the age of 30.

"Most of the people who do it are not beginner drinkers," he said. "They have a lot more sophisticated taste, maybe even go in looking for a little more in a beer product." Proksa agreed.

"I use it as a way to introduce people to better beer," he said. He likes being able to take his beers to parties or to other people's houses when he goes for dinner.



Staff photo by Jean Koopman

Home-brewer Joe Formanek of Bolingbrook adds hops in a process known as "dry-hopping."

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And for someone with a thirst for better beer, Seaman thinks home-brew just may be the answer.

"A lot of times, home-brew is better than anything you can buy," he said. "The home-brewer can take more care with each batch. For example, a brewery may have to move a particular batch of beer before it really should be moved because of commercial reasons, he said.

"You can get a more unique product from a home-brew product," Seaman said.

In fact, Gravel said, it's the wide variety of home beers that appeal to many club members.

"There are literally hundreds of different styles of beer," he said.

"Home-brew styles are more varied,"

Formanek agreed. "It's the nice thing about home-brewing — you have so many options," he said.

Beer basics

Formanek explained there are essentially two types of beers — ales and lagers. Ales use yeasts that ferment at warmer temperatures like 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Lagers, like Budweiser, and other light beers

one can usually buy at the supermarket, are made from yeasts that require cooler temperatures like 40 degrees Fahrenheit for fermentation and so require refrigeration.

Within those two categories, there are many types and many alcohol levels from 12 percent down to 2 percent, Formanek said. Gravel, his fellow scientist, noted that while there may be hundreds of styles of beer, they're all made up of just four ingredients: water, hops, yeast and malt.

"With those four things we can make that incredible range of beers," he said.

Generally speaking, home-brewers don't pursue the hobby to save money, though Seaman noted that sometimes lovers of premium styles of beer might — particularly those who prefer Belgian beers. "Belgian beers can be \$8 to \$10 a bottle and you can make it for about 75 cents," Seaman said. "So the cost savings are actually significant for the unique styles of beer."

Otherwise, saving money isn't the incentive for home-brewers, Proksa said.

"It's just the pride in doing something on your own... pride in producing something with your own abilities," he said. "You take pride in what you produce."

All agree it's an exceptional hobby. "It's not like some hobbies where you have a model that sits on a shelf," Gravel said. "It's fun doing it — and afterward we have got something we can consume and enjoy."

Getting started

Home-brewing, say the experts, can be as basic or as complex as you want.

"If you brew in the kitchen, it's a couple pots on the stove," Proksa said. "Some people may have more elaborate systems that take up a quarter of the basement."

Ebel and Seaman say someone can leave their shops with

all the equipment they need for around \$60. "There's a few different brewing kits out there," Ebel said. "The ones in the big chain stores — they're very simplistic kits."

Both men quoted what was obviously a common saying, "If you can boil water, you can make beer."

"But you can't expect to dump everything in a bucket and Voilà! — in two weeks, it's beer," Ebel said. Ebel, who worked for two breweries after graduating from college and has a degree in brewing and fermentation science from Chicago's Siebel Institute, said it does take a little more than that.

Around the holiday, people get those kits," he said. "They try to make it an all-in-one."

In reality, when you make home-brew, you have to move the liquid to another vessel to get it off the sediment, he said. Leaving it on the yeast too long, will give your beer an off-flavor.

"When you buy a kit from a home-brew store, you're going to get many more items," Ebel said. "I'll give you a cleaner, more traditional beer product." Seaman said a recipe will add an additional \$30.

"So you can get your first batch going for under 100 bucks," he said. Then you can keep on brewing future batches, for just the cost of the ingredients.

To brew the lighter lagers, one needs refrigeration and time.

"With an ale, you can brew on a Friday night and, within two and a half weeks, you'll have a beer that's bottled and ready to try," Formanek said.

If you're brewing a lager, one of the colder ones can take up to two, three, even five months, he said. Formanek does brew lagers, but not as many as the ales. He also brews mead, a fermented honey beverage, and cider.

Once you've made your home-brew, you take it to an Urban Knaves of Grain meeting to get advice and see what people think.

Meetings become tastings

Membership in UKG costs \$12 a year. One joins by attending a meeting and paying the dues.

The group meets in Winfield at 7:30 p.m. the last Thursday of every month at the John's Buffet, 27W482, Jewell Road. Meetings start with brief announcements or discussion of club business.

Sometimes there will be a scheduled speaker or mini-competition.

Most of the time, however, members simply socialize, share advice and sample each other's brews.

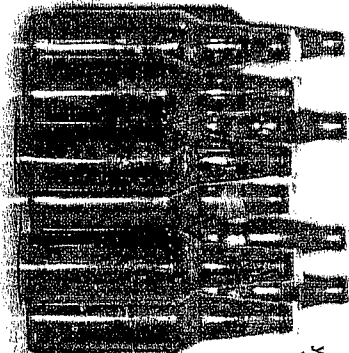
Each person will typically bring two or three bottles, Gravel said.

"It's almost like a wine-tasting, in that you don't get very much," he said. "So it goes further and more people are able to taste it."

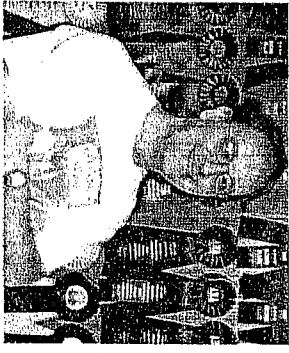
"It's different in that it's much more boisterous, I think, than you'd find at a wine-tasting."

For more information on the Urban Knaves of Grain and the Drunk Monk Challenge, visit the UKG Web site at [www.knaves.org](http://www.knaves.org) or call Proksa at (630) 322-6725.

For home-brewing information and supplies, visit the American Homebrewers Association Web site at [www.beer-town.org/homebrewing](http://www.beer-town.org/homebrewing), The Brewers Coop Web site at [www.brewerscoop.com](http://www.brewerscoop.com) or Home Brew Shop's Web site at [www.homebrewshopllc.com](http://www.homebrewshopllc.com).



Brown bottles help protect Darrell Proksa's home-brew from the effects of light.



Staff photo by Fran Koopman Joe Formanek of Bollingbrook, who has just been named the Midwest Homebrewer of the Year for the fourth year in a row by the American Homebrewers Association, poses with some of his ribbons.

Competing for the best brew

Last year, the Urban Knaves of Grain hosted the annual convention of the American Homebrewers Association, along with south-suburban and Chicago clubs.

Every year in March, however, the club hosts its own major home-brew competition, the Drunk Monk Challenge, which draws entries from around the Midwest and farther. For the past few years, it has attracted 400 to 500 entries from up to 24 states and, according to board member Joe Formanek, is one of the top five competitions in the country.

The contest name is based on the club's logo, a picture of medieval brewing monks, one of whom has sampled too much of his wares.

This year's event will be held Saturday, March 20, at Walter Payton's Roundhouse America's Brewpub in Aurora.

The competition is sanctioned by the AHA and is the first leg of its Midwest Homebrewer of the Year award, as well as a qualifying event for the Masters Championship of Amateur Brewing.

There are two judging sessions — 9 to 11:30 a.m. and 1 to 3:30 p.m. During those sessions, there are competitions among a number of beers in at least 26 styles. The Best in Show competition, made up of all the winners from the first two sessions, begins at 4 p.m.

While the judges are determining the best beer in the show, a separate competition — the Menace of the Monastery, which focuses only on Belgian ales — is conducted. Its purpose is primarily to keep the other judges busy, Formanek said. The awards ceremony follows the Best in Show judging.

Although the competition is intensely interesting to those involved, it is not an event that would appeal to the public, Formanek said.

The club also participates six times a year in AHA-sponsored club-only competitions. These competitions, hosted by different home-brew clubs around the country, usually have a theme like stouts, pale ales, wheat beers or pilsners. The UKG hosts its own mini-competitions at meetings to select the club's entry.