



Brewery Tour

Craft brewing is taking off in Ontario. From the guy in the garage to multi-million dollar businesses – Ontario loves craft beer. And our neck of the woods is no exception. There are a few names in south Grey County – the venerable Neustadt Brewery and the more recent [Maclean's Ales](#). And, in neighbouring Simcoe County, there's a small concentration of breweries right in Collingwood.

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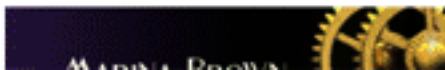


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WE'VE GOT YOUR LUMBER.



Even better, there's a tour!

Jennie Elmslie is our tour guide. She is co-owner, along with Matt Code, of [Free Spirit Tours](#). The pair is usually outdoors – leading groups in rock climbing, canoeing or snowshoeing. But today, we are all about the breweries on a tour that Free Spirit started about two years ago when three breweries all opened, coincidentally, at around the same time in Collingwood.

Jennie is passionate about the area. She knows the people and the places in this patch where the two Counties meet (Simcoe and Grey) and is also a history buff about everything from local shipwrecks to the names of the ski runs at Blue Mountain! She says the beer tour pulls much of its audience from Blue Mountain Village – with corporate groups, but also bachelor parties or birthday parties.

The breweries, in tour order, are: **SideLaunch Brewery; Collingwood Brewery; Northwinds**

Brewhouse. At the first two locations, you get a peek at the art of making beer – along with sampling the products – and at the third, Northwinds Brewhouse, you'll get a *flight* (an ample taste of four different beers) accompanied with some home-made salty pretzels and you can view their prodigious beer production behind a glass wall. All three breweries have websites and social media, so you can check in on seasonal or weekend specials, new offerings and events.



These impressive tanks will soon be replaced with others – twice this size!



On my tour, I am riding along with a small group, father and son – Mansel and Angus – Torontonians, who have a family chalet at Craigeleith (Mansel's wife gifted him the tour).

First stop, **SideLaunch Brewery** is also the largest of the three outfits. Not Molson's big, but sizeable for a micro-brewery. Indeed everything at SideLaunch looks big – the tower of beer cans to be shipped, the single timber bar top and especially the shiny beer vats (which are 7000 litres and are soon being replaced by new ones of twice the volume).

With Collingwood's storied past as a ship building town, SideLaunch is named for the way the ships were launched – with a big splash – into the Collingwood harbour of Georgian Bay. According to its website: "In Collingwood, when you launched a ship sideways the whole town showed up to celebrate. When you work hard to craft the perfect beer the whole town shows up to celebrate but stays way longer."

Bobbie, our affable bartender, pulls samples of beer for us at the magnificent timber bar and explains some of the brewing process and beer styles.

We have a taste of the current most popular Mountain Lager; followed by a Wheat Beer – with flavour esters that include banana; then a Dark Lager, Munich-style and "a great [session beer](#)" and their popular Pale Ale – a marriage of "traditional English with modern American pale ale styles."

We are also treated to one of the last tastes of a Belgium-style beer – a very heady brew at 8.3% alcohol – it was a single batch that was brewed for Christmas and is gone 'til next year.



Tall Angus is dwarfed by this tower of SideLaunch beer.

Like all of the breweries on this tour, SideLaunch beers are available in cans, growlers (two sizes) and kegs directly from the brewery's on-site retail store. SideLaunch is also available in 260 LCBO stores – the highest penetration of any Collingwood micro-brewery.

Hot on their heels in distribution is the eponymous **Collingwood Brewery**.

Two Collingwood Brewery beers are available at 200 LCBOs and their new pilsner is at The Beer Store. And, of course, you can buy the product direct from the brewery.

Chris Freeman, the owner and brewmaster at Collingwood Brewery, was recently featured in a [Globe & Mail story about his alma mater, the only brewmaster school in Canada at Niagara College.](#)



Brewmaster Freeman in the spacious Collingwood Brewery Tap Room.

At Collingwood Brewery, we are greeted by Sarah, who shows us around and answers all our questions, while explaining the brewing process. And, as we arrive, one of the brewers and also a Niagara grad, Mark Lewis, is filling a hopper with malt to begin the process of making "mash."

And, then of course, the samples! (Full disclosure: since friends in the Beaver Valley brought some to our place at New Year's, the Fireside ESB is my current favourite beer).

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We sample Downhill, a pale ale in a pale blue tin. The Garafraxa Café in the Town of Durham has recently started serving this beer. Here's what they say on Facebook, "This beer blends a firm maltiness with an assertive hop character. A medium-bodied ale with a nice amber/orange colour, it has a taste of citrus and toasted malt with a touch of sweetness."



And we sample the excellent Fireside, Extra Special Bitter. The brewery website says that this beer is "inspired by one of our favourite styles of English beer. A darker, malt-forward companion to Pale ale, it carries notes of toasted nuts, toffee and sweet caramel."

Many micro-breweries have one or more seasonal specialties or single batch brews. Collingwood Brewery is no exception. Each harvest season, they make Vintage Ale from fresh or "wet" hops – handpicked only minutes before they get added to the brew. The fresh organic hops come from Big Head Hops Farm in Meaford Township.

Although they are not a restaurant, the airy Collingwood Brewery Tap Room is a great party space, available for rentals, and has hosted several local events.

Our next stop is a restaurant – and a brewery, **Northwinds Brewhouse**. According to its website, Northwinds is a 15 barrel brewhouse which means that each time they brew a beer, they brew approximately 15 barrels – about 1,500 to 1,600 litres of finished beer per batch. There's a lot to like here, with more than thirty beer varieties brewed on site, plus room at the taps for guest brews and ciders.



Also unique at Northwinds is that they don't sell through the LCBO or The Beer Store – most of the beer they brew is consumed in the pub, some is available at other restaurants, and they have a take-home bottle shop at the restaurant, too – for single serving bottles and glass growlers.



Here we get to enjoy our finale – [a flight](#) of four beers, alongside a small snack of salty bread pretzels. Plus, Jennie puts our beer trivia to the test with a game of 20 questions. Our small but mighty tour group did alright! And the setting helped, as some of the clues are posted around the room. (Hint: several brews are named for local places, such as Old Baldy, and local celebrities such as Wee Willi Winkels)

The gorgeous flight includes: Yacht Club mild ale, Back Country, Corduroy Rye and Milk Run. This last choice turns out to be a delicious coffee stout! I say delicious, Northwinds says, “an opaque beer with a thick tan head. The aroma is fresh ground coffee, unsweetened cocoa, and hints of vanilla.”



The Corduroy Rye IPA is a classic for this brewhouse, the first that Northwinds ever brewed for the public, way back in 2013, before the restaurant even opened.

Tour Details

The afternoon Brewery Tour in Collingwood is approximately three hours (1pm-4pm) and is booked through Free Spirit, any day with a minimum of six people. For \$55 per person (+HST) your tour group is chauffeured in the Free Spirit van to the three micro-breweries in Collingwood, where you can learn about beer-making and taste free samples of the various brews. Pickup and drop off is at the Mountain or in Collingwood (pickup/drop off at your door in Collingwood vicinity can be arranged for a fee.) For bookings, call 705-444-3622 or [visit the website](#).



Feature photo: Our tour group starts it off at SideLaunch Brewery's magnificent timber bar. L-R: Jennie, Mansel, Angus.

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