

Auburn University Offers Beer Brewing Course

RUSS COREY, TimesDaily

FLORENCE, Ala. (AP) — It's not often a graduate-level course at a major university kicks off its first semester with a trip to a well-known microbrewery outside Denver.

Then again, this is the first time Auburn University has offered a study program centered around brewing beer.

Conversations about the Brewing Science and Operations program began about four years ago as craft beer enthusiasts pushed for changes to laws regarding the sale of craft beer and home brewing in Alabama.

Program Director Martin O'Neill said his department received more than 300 expressions of interest in the new distance learning program without one ounce of advertising. O'Neill is the head of Auburn's department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Hospitality Management in the College of Human Sciences.

"We have accepted 20 for a class we only wanted to accept 10 for," O'Neill said.

One of those 20 is Michelle Jones, co-owner of Florence's first microbrewery, Singin' River Brewing Co.

Rob and Michelle Jones opened the microbrewery late last year and began brewing beer in February.

O'Neill said the program consists of six classes over three semesters. When completed, participants will receive a graduate certificate and be eligible to sit for the Institute of Brewing and Distilling's General Certificate/Diploma of Brewing examinations.

Located in the United Kingdom, the IBD is the world's leading organization dedicated to the education and training needs of brewers and distillers.

Jones said she wants to become more knowledgeable about the brewing aspect of the business, which is basically handled by her husband and brewmaster, George Grantinetti. Jones said she's more involved in the financial aspect of the brewery.

"I just wanted to add some input," she said.

Jones said the course begins with the basics of brewing, such as materials, the various processes and the biology and chemistry of brewing.

O'Neill said the program is science and materials based. It will also touch on agronomy, chemistry, engineering and the business of brewing.

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"It's one thing to be able to make great beer," O'Neill said. "It's another to get the doors open for a premises that makes good beer, and marketing and distribution."

Along with traditional online PowerPoint presentations, O'Neill said Auburn is using a high definition video production crew to bring the subject matter alive. The course began Aug. 18 and continues through the fall, spring and summer semesters. It will conclude in August 2015.

Jones said the kickoff took place in Longmont, Colorado, at the Oskar Blues Brewery, which was founded by former Florence resident Dale Katechis.

There was a tour of the brewery and farms that provide materials for the brewery as well as several opportunities to network with the Oskar Blues crew.

O'Neill said out of the 20 course participants, a third are from Alabama. He said the Alabama Brewers Guild has provided input, as have Alabama craft microbreweries such as Good People and Cahaba, of Birmingham, and Back 40, of Gadsden.

"We're interviewing people about what they do, why they do it and how they do it," O'Neill said.

When the seeds for the program were planted, Alabama only had about four or five microbreweries, O'Neill said. By the end of this year, the state will have more than 40.

"The industry in this state has been phenomenal," O'Neill said. "There's not one day I receive an email from someone offering assistance. The Alabama Brewers Guild has been absolutely incredible."

He said Alabama microbreweries provide more than just good beer. They also provide jobs, not only to the microbreweries' employees, but to the people who grow the ingredients, and those who work in distribution, marketing promotion and retail sales.

O'Neill said the course requires at least one residency weekend at Oskar Blues Brewery in Longmont or Brevard, North Carolina. Since she owns a brewery, Jones will be able to take her residency at Singin' River.

O'Neill said Auburn plans to offer the Brewing Science program every year and eventually create a full master brewer's program in the next two or three years.

Rob Jones accompanied his wife on the trip to Longmont, but is not participating in the Brewing Science program.

"She's interested in brewing," Rob Jones said. "I've done a good bit of home brewing, but she's never brewed herself. She'll wind up being the assistant brewmaster. And she hopes to gain some knowledge of the business side as well."

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