

Rock Bottom Hits Portland

by Gary Corbin

Published in the Brew Crew News, January, 1995

Yet another brewpub is gracing Portland's suds-lovers palates! The Rock Bottom Brewery opened its doors December 19 at Second and Morrison SW, offering five in-house brews and a broad menu of non-traditional pub fare. This is Rock Bottom's fourth location nationwide; originally from Boulder, CO, they've expanded to Houston and Minneapolis before discovering Oregon's Beervana.

I passed by Rock Bottom on Friday, December 16th and noticed the huge crowd inside. Concluding that this must be opening night, I strode in and asked for a table. "What party are you with?" Ky Belk, the assistant manager, asked. I explained that I bring a party atmosphere wherever I go, but I could tell it was no use. "We're sorry," she said, "it's private parties only tonight. We don't officially open until Monday."

So, I did some shameless name-dropping. "I'm the new treasurer of the Oregon Brew Crew," I explained, "and I was hoping to check this place out as a potential meeting place for the club."

"Oh really?" she smiled. "Let me see if there's something I can do." A minute later, I was set up at the bar with a complimentary sampler of their five brews and a plate of warm, tasty beer bread, with general manager Gregg Schillinger at my elbow, explaining the Rock Bottom approach. It turned out to be good marketing, because both my wife and I have brought our office mates there since. (All in the name of research, of course.)

The pub is clearly aiming for tourist business, with its downtown location, diverse menu, and fern-bar-meets-lodge look. (Not only that, but Gregg told me so straight out.) It's actually three pubs in one. The bar in front will attract passers-by and small after-work groups who will munch on appetizers of soft pretzels and spinach con queso. The restaurant seating in back serves a good selection of tasty dinners, from fish and chips to pastas and vegetarian dishes. Upstairs, half a dozen new pool tables and lots of exposed wood lend a neighborhood bar feel. Uniting them all is the beer and an Oregon Trail motif depicted in a generous display of black-and-white photography.

Enough fluff; here's the important data. The beers are lighter than they should be, both in body and appearance, for each style they are producing. The Cryin' Coyote Western Ale is as blond as a Henry's, although a tad more hoppy. The White Pelican Pale Ale has a bit more character and will probably sell better here. It is light-to-medium-bodied with a hoppy nose and is well-balanced. The Falcon Red aspires to be an IPA, but is closer to what I'd call a traditional Pale Ale, with a light caramel color and more bitterness than the other two. The Nut Brown is delicious but not very true to style. It's a very light brown (more of an amber) with too much hop bitterness for its style. However, it has a full mouthfeel and a noticeable roasted barley flavor. Finally, the Seal Stout is the lightest stout in town. Again, it's a good beer, but I'd classify it somewhere between a brown ale and a porter, with its medium-brown color, sweet flavor, and

hoppy nose.

The (rock) bottom line: the beers have that distinctive Pacific Northwest hop character we're used to, but less body and malt flavor and are lighter in color than Portland's more established microbrews. The latter is a bit surprising since brewers Matt Sage and Mark Youngquist are former Bridgeport brewers.

Rock Bottom is an attractive alternative downtown spot if you want a decent meal and a quick brew after work while waiting for the downtown nightlife to begin. It's also a safe place to bring the out-of-town guests who want to experience this crazy Portland beer phenomenon but don't want to venture very far from Coormillob Lite. So get them a glass of Coyote Ale, grab yourself a pitcher of Seal Stout, and share a plate of beer bread. Right around Miller time.