



Rockport herbalist struggles with FDA regulations

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

ROCKPORT — This time of year, demand is high in the aisles of Royal River Natural Foods in Freeport for an echinacea and goldenseal compound that is great for colds and the flu, according to Becky Foster, the store's supplement and body care manager.

But this flu season, customers seeking the remedy are out of luck. Deb Soule, founder of 30-year-old Rockport company Avena Botanicals, decided in late summer to temporarily halt the production of tinctures and compounds until Avena can complete the testing protocols required by the federal Food and Drug Administration.

"The road to compliance is long and expensive," she wrote in a letter posted on her website. "We appreciate your patience and support as we navigate this complicated terrain."

Foster, however, wants to be proactive. She said she and others from Royal River are trying to educate their customers about the regulatory situation that has been making business difficult

for Avena Botanicals for several years. They also sent a letter to the office of Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, in an effort to get help with the regulatory crackdown.

"A lot of your local herbalists are not going to have the wherewithal to do the crazy things the FDA is asking them to do and survive," Foster said. "This is a terrible thing that I don't think a lot of people realize right now. It's like a disbelief that this is happening. Our herbalist is doing everything right. She needs our support right now. She heals many, and we need to help her."

Just a few years ago, Soule and her employees were primarily concerned with the business of growing herbs and handcrafting extracts, elixirs, salves and other products that are sold around the state and the country. Avena Botanicals' gardens are certified organic and biodynamic, and signs on the access road encourage drivers to take care with butterflies, birds and the other living things on the property. In the growing season, the land blooms with more than 150 different medicinal herbs, flowers, trees and shrubs, Soule,

a traditionally trained herbalist, said. In all her years of selling tinctures, salves and other herbal products, no one has gotten hurt, or sick, or died from their use.

"Avena's track record is impeccable. We really do our best to do no harm to anybody. That is really important to us," she said.

But the herbal industry is regulated under the same law as dietary supplements, and by 2010 all companies were required to be compliant with the FDA's Current Good Manufacturing Practice regulations. Soule had taken big steps to get there, including moving her production out of an old farmhouse and building a \$300,000 building in its place that is up to standard. Since 2010, Avena Botanicals has had three comprehensive inspections from the federal regulators, and Soule said she has been striving to build record-keeping and other systems that will get a pass from the agency.

Efforts to get comment from an FDA spokesperson were not immediately successful.

"It's been challenging, and it's been stressful, and it's been fi-



COURTESY OF DEB SOULE

Deb Soule, the founder of Avena Botanicals.

nancially really difficult," Soule said of efforts to comply with the

regulatory standards. "We had
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Blood, sweat and beer



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TJ Hansen (left) and John LeGassey sort kegs while waiting for their first shipment of hops and yeast at Fore River Brewing in South Portland on Tuesday. The pair hope to be brewing test batches of their pale ale, red ale and stout by the end of the week.

Handcrafting a new South Portland brewery

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

SOUTH PORTLAND — "If you grew up with a camp in northern Maine, it looked like this," John LeGassey said in his soon-to-open tasting room.

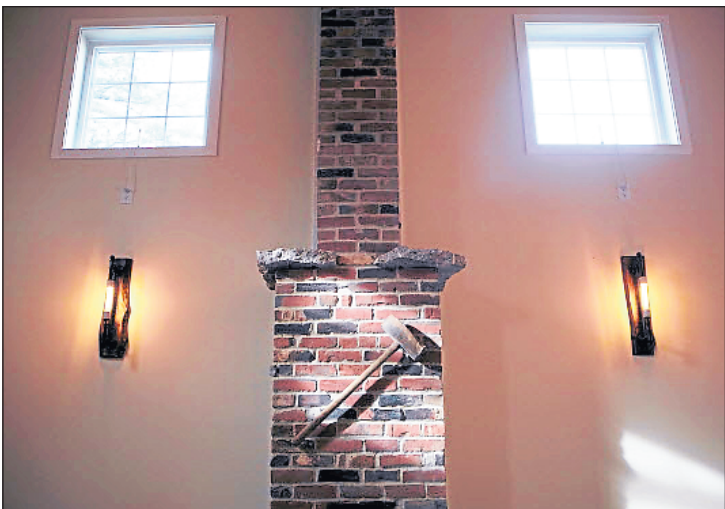
A fire in the brick hearth. Rough-sawn wooden counters. Clean pine ceilings. Natural light streaming in. Plunked in South Portland's thickly settled Cash Corner, this barn-like space is far from the backwoods of Katahdin.

But when Fore River Brewing Co. opens this month with an oatmeal milk stout, long months of blood, sweat and beers will be unleashed at last.

Since the spring, LeGassey and his two business partners, Alex Anastasoff and TJ Hansen, have worked around the clock converting a former salt storage shed into South Portland's newest commercial brewery and tasting room. The space, created with salvaged materials that include 200-year-old bricks and wood milled from local trees, is a fitting setting for a modern Maine beer company.

"Growing up on a farm, you get used to saving what's there," Anastasoff, a Saco native and builder, said. "That ethic goes in at a really young age."

Anastasoff used the 1,000-square-foot space to run his landscaping company, Lawn Enforcement Inc., until he sold the business 18 months ago. Ready for a career change, he decided to try his hand at running a brewery with his friend, homebrewer Hansen, and LeGassey. To do that he doubled the space. Together the trio



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A slag hammer nicknamed "John Henry" hangs on a chimney of reclaimed bricks at Fore River Brewing in South Portland on Tuesday. The hammer was found on site during construction and became the brewers' favorite tool during the remodeling.

crafted an environment to complement their traditional beers.

"Old barns are kind of comforting. You can walk into any old barn and feel like you belong there. It's timeless," Anastasoff, 40, said. "You can sit down and feel comfortable."

The neo-rustic vibe is evident immediately when you pull into the drive.

Underneath sliding barn doors is the hint of a cobblestone path, made "to look like a wagon might come through," Anastasoff said. But for years, salt trucks and ride-on lawn mowers were the only traffic. Before that, buses idled in this former garage at all hours of the day and night.

The tasting room used to be exterior mulch storage. Wooden post-and-beam construction around the bar resembles an old hayloft as a kind of canopy.

A slice of silver maple is a bar top, sitting on a series of black birch logs weathered and stained.

"We were going for the appearance of an older barn and preparing for future expansion at the same time," Anastasoff said.

Using a sawmill on site, they cut black birch, maple, pine and cedar. The wood used in the space is from trees grown in the area Anastasoff had in reserve.

To see where the beer is brewed, hop heads pass through a warm maple-framed archway. Fermentation tanks loom impressively where road salt was stored.

"We hauled out tons of concrete," said Anastasoff, who with help from his partners dismantled a reinforced concrete wall. A section has remained.

"I don't like to throw anything away," Anastasoff said. From salvaged granite from the Veteran's Memorial Bridge to wall sconces and chandeliers made of black iron pipe, even the chimney constructed with waterstruck bricks that date back 200 years. "We made every aspect," he said.

Just like the old English-style hops in their stout and red ale, every ingredient matters. "I like the history of the brick. You can't reproduce the same feel with new bricks," Anastasoff said.

With beer tourists flocking to Maine in droves and outfits such as The Maine Brew Bus making it easy for visitors to get around, a brewery's environment is increasingly associated with what's in the glass. Both should be tasteful.

"We've had an explosion in new breweries around the state, which is good for tourism. People like to stop by a local brewery for a tasting before they go to a restaurant," Joshua Reny, South Portland's economic development director, said.

"What's happening in Portland is spilling over."

When people cross the Fore River to this less than glamorous locale, this brewery wants to be a destination. They've taken pains to make it so.

"We hand built all the lighting, sawed nearly every piece of wood in here on our saw mill and split the granite for our chimney," LeGassey said. "I grew up in Medway in Penobscot County around lumber, so we're pretty well used to using the tools to build what we were looking for."

Diversity of faiths thrive in Maine

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
BDN STAFF

SURRY — By some accounts, Maine may be the least religious state in the nation, but don't tell that to the Buddhists who worship and meditate quietly together at the Morgan Bay Zendo, located in a serene clearing near the sea in Surry.

And don't tell it to the 26 or so members of the Hridaya Hermitage in Industry, who live, work, play, study and worship together in a traditional Yogic hermitage set amid the hardwood forests, rushing streams and mountains of western Maine.

In midwinter, when the long northern nights are brightened by Christmas carols, Hanukkah candles and special holiday traditions, members of these two East-meets-West religious groups in Maine intertwine their faith with their everyday lives. Religion is not something for Sundays or special times of the year, but for every day.

On New Year's Day, numbers swell. As many as 60 people come and begin the year in the zendo. There's something special about meditating in the company of others.

"It's thriving, to say the least," Bhagavan Das Lescault, 38, said of the Hridaya Hermitage, where practitioners follow Hindu traditions. "The ashram grew slowly over the years. Now there are temples, shrines, walking meditation trails. It's a whole village. It is amazing."

In Surry, things are a little different at the zendo, where the busiest days came before founder and Rinzai Zen teacher Walter Nowick retired from formal teaching in the mid-1980s. Back then, the practitioners also were home-steaders. One of those early students, Charles Guilford, came from San Francisco nearly 40 years ago to study under Nowick. He lived in a small cabin on the property, and in addition to his religious studies, he spent a lot of time working on Nowick's farm. He spoke after a recent Sunday meditation practice, at which he was one of just a handful of attendees.

When he came to Nowick and told him he wanted to be his student, the Zen teacher told him, "I promise you nothing and trouble," Guilford recalled.

"He pushed people in unusual ways," he said of Nowick, who died in 2013. "You had the zendo, and the formal training, and then you had the work on the farm. ... He was a good teacher. There's a Zen saying — walk through the mist, and all of a sudden you're soaking wet without even realizing it."
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