



Luke Nicholas, Epic Brewing Company, New Zealand

Don't feel hopeless any more

Making great-tasting beer calls for a prodigious amount of toil and love. It also takes a shedload of hops; in fact, there are 25 hops crammed into every pint of Epic pale ale.

Many brewers call that insane. We call it flavour.

Luke is clearly a man on a mission – things to do, flavours to impart, awards to win – oh, and accountants and marketers to prove wrong.

This extremely talented brewer is on a mission to bring great-tasting beer to New Zealand, where he felt that the aforementioned professions had left a nation awash with fizzy, tasteless beers which tick the boxes of cost, margin and profit, but with seemingly scant regard for character, flavour or creativity.

"It's fair to say that I am obsessed about brewing beer with flavour and balance. I like to cram in the hops.

"Brewing kind of came naturally to me, as I grew up with a grandfather, James Fogarty, who was a dedicated home brewer and a major influence in my life, long before I reached drinking age. Also, on my eighteenth birthday, I was presented with my own home-brewing kit from my grandfather, so the family influence was strong, perhaps more so than I realised."

In his early professional life, having

qualified from university, he left New Zealand to work in LA in the mid 1990s.

"This is where my obsession with brewing really took off. I joined a home brew club, as much for the social aspect as for the beer, but soon found myself immersed in all things brewing – fascinated by the microbrewers' brew pubs – all creating different flavours, all with their own beer identity, in effect. It was such a stark contrast to what was on offer back home."

At one of the monthly brewing meetings, held at Stein Fillers Brew Shop in Long Beach, California, a guest speaker from Huntington Beach Brewing Company uttered some words which would set Luke on his journey from home brewer to award-winning brewer.

"It wasn't a time-stopping, light-shining-on-me moment, but the speaker simply said: 'If you want to be a brewer, go to your local brewery and ask for a job – and be prepared to do it for nothing.' Looking back, it might have been not so much a pearl of wisdom as a clever recruitment drive for getting free labour!"

Whatever the speaker's motivation, the words stuck; three months on and Luke was back in New Zealand helping out – free – at the Cock & Bull brew pub in East Tamaki, Auckland. Within 18 months, Luke was not only head brewer, but was getting paid! He returned the favour by winning for the brewery the 'supreme champion award' at New Zealand's inaugural beer awards in 1999. Incidentally, Luke followed up the début victory by also taking the title in 2001 and 2006.

With Luke's creativity and constant quest for innovation, it was inevitable that he would ultimately own his own beer brand.

In 2006, Luke was given the chance to brew his own beer – Epic – after the Steam Brewing Company brewery (the brewing arm of the Cock & Bull pub chain) purchased another brewing company. Luke suggested that he should contract-brew and bottle Epic Beer at the

brewery; a year later, he had established the Epic Brewing Company, in Auckland.

Unsurprisingly, Luke's influences remain largely American, with the respect seemingly mutual, as Luke has returned more than once to judge at the World Beer Cup, San Diego, as well as attending the Craft Brewers' Conferences.

"I still take influence from America, where I see plenty of craft brewers experimenting with new and exciting flavours, as well as different brewing techniques. I have to be honest, though, and say that I still brew largely what I like and hope that enough other people like it too.

"I love flavours, especially hops. Subtlety isn't something I am good at. I like to turn up the flavours and see how it comes out and then find the right balance.

Most brewers in New Zealand think me insane, what with the amount of hops which I use – but, luckily, more and more New Zealanders are appreciating the hoppy taste."

So, what does Luke think about brewing Epic in the UK and bringing that hoppiness to Wetherspoon?

"It's great to know that life can still throw up some surprises. I couldn't have imagined that the phone would ring from 12,000 miles away, saying: 'How do you fancy brewing some beer?' ..especially for such a massive and well-known festival."

So, to many people, visiting a country where he's never been, using a brewery which he's never seen and packaging into cask – which he has never done before – would be a daunting task. However, to Luke, you get the impression that it is all part of an Epic adventure.

You can find out more: www.epicbeer.com

Recent awards:

Winner – Best in Class 2008 – BrewNZ

Winner – Gold Medal 2008 – BrewNZ

Winner – Supreme Champion Beer 2006 – New Zealand International Beer Awards

