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Article published Jul 14, 2006

## New local brewery opens today



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VENANGO - Tonight, Brian Sprague will drink a cold beer in honor of both his 48th birthday and a dream realized at long last.

Today marks the official grand opening of Sprague Farm & Brew Works, and the beer Sprague will be drinking is one he helped brew in a newly remodeled barn in rural Crawford County.

The brewery, owned by Sprague and his wife, Mary "Minnie" Sprague, has been brewing up small batches of beer and selling them at the Venango Valley Inn for weeks.

Tonight they'll invite the public to sample their dream as the region's newest brewery begins selling to the public in both kegs and half-gallon "growlers."

With its weathered timber-frame design, a silo outside and lazy farm cats lounging in doorways, their place looks more like a barn than a brewery.

Inside, the transformation remains a work in progress.

Downstairs, stalls for dairy cows have been replaced by coolers and keg storage.

What was once a vast hay storage on the main floor has now been sectioned off into finished office space, a tasting room and a brewing room visible through a wall of windows.

The brewing room, run for now by well-known local brewer Matt Allyn, houses a secondhand

10-barrel brew house that gives the brewery a capacity of up to 300 gallons a day. Minnie Sprague said she expects they'll produce a small fraction of that amount.

Although it's invisible from Route 19, the barn seemed to the Spragues like the perfect place for their business.

"We have lived next door for 24 years so we have always admired this place," she said of the barn and land they bought in 1997.

From the beginning, they dreamed of calling the old barn home. The decision to turn it into a brewery didn't come as easily.

The Spragues, who both work full time, had lots of other things on their plates.

For years, no stump was safe around Brian Sprague, an accomplished chain-saw carver, whose work has been featured on cable television and sold around the country.

But he had a dream in the back of his head. As microbreweries began dotting the urban and Western landscape in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sprague was taken with the idea of running his own.

Sprague, who works as a supervisor for an oil and gas company, set out back then to learn all that he could about the microbrewery business. When he was done with his research, he tucked all his notes into a file and set them aside.

There was no apparent market for a microbrewery in Crawford County, and Sprague and his wife didn't have the money to start one.

"We were just ahead of our time," he said.

They're hoping now that time and circumstances have caught up with them.

Although they run a small overnight lodge next to the brewery, Minnie Sprague knew from the beginning she didn't want to run a restaurant.

"We don't even serve breakfast," she said of the Sleeping Leaf Farm Lodge. "We're not a bed-and-breakfast. We're a 'sleep-and-leave.'"

What the couple, both fans of imported and microbrew beer, did agree on was a brewery without the restaurant.

With the help of friends, neighbors and family, they've been working since this time in 2005 to breathe new purpose into their 120-year-old barn.

Minnie Sprague said she hopes the business will eventually enable her to quit her job. Her husband, an active body builder who continues to do chain-saw carving, has no such plans, she said.

"Brian is a worker," she said. "As soon as his feet hit the floor, he is moving and grooving until he passes out at night."

These days, Brian Sprague finds he not only has to be a worker but also a student at the side of Allyn, the former brew master at Four Sons Brewery in Titusville.

He's still learning the secrets and marvels at the effect that adding a tea made from juniper berries, peppercorns and orange peel has on one of his three new beers.

After years of drinking imported beer, Brian Sprague said he's happy to see American beers moving to the forefront, and he is even happier to be making some of them.

"This is America," he said. "We take a concept and we try to make it better. We are pioneers, whether we are going to the moon or making beer."

Like his wife, he's quietly confident that this brewery in the middle of nowhere can succeed.

But he's not worried about what happens if it doesn't.

"You can sit around here and think about doing something, but it's not the same as doing it," he said.

Minnie Sprague is equally comfortable with the chance they're taking.

"You only live once," she said. "We never had children. This (investment) is our children's college education. Hopefully we will get something back from it."

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Last changed: Jul 14, 2006

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