

Steven Pauwels

Brewmaster, Boulevard Brewing Company

How to go from being you to strutting down the boulevard in 9 easy steps.

Steven Pauwels left Belgium for Missouri nine years ago. With him, he brought craftsmanship, tradition and a relentless drive to experiment. Here's how Boulevard Brewing Company became the Midwest's largest independent brewer—and its most eclectic.



Photograph by Thomas Gibson

1 Drink? Yell? Yes!

Steven Pauwels grew up in Belgium, surrounded by beer. His father worked in Eeklo's regional brewery, Brouwerij Krüger, and he remembers "smelling the beer" in the air. He'd work summers in the brewery. "I liked what the guy in the white coat was doing—he was drinking beer all day and yelling at people. I thought, that's pretty cool, maybe I should do that." He went off to study biochemistry and engineering, and has been brewing ever since.

2 Get conditioned

Pauwels' grand plan was to climb the ranks of Krüger and seize the master brewer's job, but Interbrew bought the brewery and shut it down. On to Plan B. Pauwels landed a job at a brewpub in Louvain, worked there for six years, and then spent nine months in Brugge, learning how to bottle and package. It was the best move he could've made. John McDonald, owner of Boulevard, was looking to Europe for a brewer who could bottle condition ales; after his time in Brugge, Pauwels fit the bill. The two connected, and McDonald lured Pauwels to Missouri.

3 Follow the jobs

The jump from Belgium to the Midwest might seem counterintuitive to Americans who worship at the altar of the Abbeys, but, Pauwels says, "Nine years ago, there was no job for a brewer in Belgium. Breweries were closing left and right, and I really was not that interested in working at a big brewery." Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, "things were booming." Even more important than the market were the attitudes. "When I interviewed here in Kansas City, I was blown away by how motivated people were. These guys were so eager to do new things."

4 Do more with less

"I don't like one-dimensional beers," Pauwels says. "I like there to be more to it." But more doesn't necessarily mean doubling up on ingredients. It means experimentation, and pushing your ingredients to their limits. "You can call me a lazy brewer, or a technologist, or an operations guy. I like to use one yeast strain, and see how much I can get that yeast to do different things for me." He'll vary malts, platos, temperatures, pressures—anything to get his yeast to evolve. "I think it's really neat making a Saison, a Tripel and a Quadrupel with one yeast strain, because they're three completely different beers. That's very satisfying."

5 Know your drinkers

Boulevard beers, paced by top-selling Unfiltered Wheat and Pale Ales, are clean and balanced to a fault: "Drinkable," Pauwels says, "but still complex." It's a portfolio that seeks to get consumers to trade fizzy macro lagers for "plain, good beer." The Smokestack series, which launched with a Saison, a Tripel, a Double IPA and a Quad, is an entirely different beast, brewed for innovation-hungry beer geeks. "Being innovative is not easy anymore," Pauwels concedes. But, he adds, the brewery had to make a statement "to get hot and sexy again."

6 Call it "tasty"

Beer styles exist for one reason, Pauwels insists: "They're there to be mixed up. Who says that one beer was so great to name a style after it, and that everybody needs to stay to it? It needs to evolve." Pauwels' beers do just that. He was an early advocate of brewing with wet hops and Brettanomyces. Bully! Porter, an old-school Boulevard brand, defies categorization; brewed with Ahtanum hops, it can't be judged alongside

brown or robust Porters. New Smokestack brews include a cherry-scented Quad aged in bourbon barrels and what Pauwels can only describe as "a big wheat beer" that falls halfway between a Weizenbock and a Wheatwine. "But what do you call it? German-Belgo-American?"

7 If it fits, it fits

Pauwels' Saison is only beginning to get its due, though the recipe itself is years old. It's one of several experimental brews that Boulevard would make for internal consumption, but, prior to a 2007 brewhouse expansion, never had the capacity to produce commercially. "If we didn't have it all the time, there was a riot going on," Pauwels says. He's had a harder time finding a home for it in competition, because it's brewed with "loads of Amarillo." Pauwels shrugs off the criticism. "It just fits."

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It's the same reason he began infecting vintages of Saison with Brett. "To me, Saison should be a typical beer that is very earthy. How do you get that earthiness in there? You get it a little from the yeast, a little from the hops, but man, if you put that Brett in there, it really does it."

8 Lead by following

Why has Boulevard been able to grow so quickly—from 39,000 barrels annually when Pauwels arrived, to 140,000—and in so many different directions? "It's not me," the brewmaster insists. "It's the people I work with." Double Wide IPA is a prime example—it's a bottom-up recipe that was allowed to grow and flourish. "I don't have anything to do with it. Those guys ran with it. That's the best motivator you can have. They need to be creative. If you can't be creative, if you're just here to move liquid around, you're in the wrong brewery."

9 Find your own path

Dogmatic adherence to styles can hamper commercial brewers, Pauwels believes, but it can be fatal to homebrewers. "I talk to homebrewers that want to clone some of our beers. I say, can't you see the luxury you have? You don't have to imitate. You've got to go out and make your own stuff. Make your own styles. Be creative. [Styles] help, initially. It's something that you have to go through as a homebrewer because it gives you nice guidelines. But at one point, you've got to say, forget it, I know what I'm doing now, and I'm going to do my own thing."

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