

# A Kingdom of Brew

WEDNESDAY, 04 AUGUST 2010 18:50



*The days of average lager are over with the opening of Kingdom Breweries, a state-of-the-art European facility located on the banks of the Tonle Sap. **Nora Lindstrom** samples their premium brew.*

Opening a brewery in Cambodia may not be the most obvious idea. For Peter Brongers, CEO of new Kingdom Breweries, however, the venture not only made perfect business sense, but also gave him a chance to fulfil a long term dream—drink his own beer. “The most beautiful thing in life is combining business with what you like to do,” he says. Although he says average beer consumption in Cambodia currently stands at a lowly seven litres per person per year, he claims there is lots of money to be made. “The beer market here is

growing very fast.”

The venture took off late last year following an investment by Leopard Cambodia Fund, the country’s first private equity company. “It was a sensible investment for them,” Brongers says. “We wanted to start a small brewery that makes a quality product that not only tastes good, but also looks good, has a distinct identity, espouses green values, and looks after its people.”

Though the first batch of bottles has only just been filled, Brongers is confident of success. To brew the company’s flagship pilsener, only the best Czech hops and premium German malt is used, with no artificial additives. A German brewmaster, Peter Haupenthal, was brought in to oversee production. “We’re the first microbrewery in Cambodia,” he says. “There are brew pubs that make beer only for their own consumption, but we hope we can sell everything we make here.”

According to Haupenthal, real pilsner, such as Pilsner Urquell, is made in the Czech Republic using premium local malt and hops, with the water in the Pilsen region giving the beer its distinct taste.

“We’re as close to a pilsener as we can be,” he says, “no one else in Cambodia does that.”

With a strong, crisp and slightly bitter aftertaste, Kingdom Pilsener is certainly in a different league from the regular lager. Perfect on a hot day, half a pint of the brew leaves a sense of having drunk real beer, not average dishwater.

While it will soon be available in bars, restaurants and shops around town, a more interesting way to sample the beer is to visit the factory itself. Tours for visitors are set to be organised on a regular basis, giving participants a chance to first learn about how the beer is produced and later enjoy some frothy cold ones at the establishment's bar which features great views over the Tonle Sap river.

The building itself is also of interest. Designed by Uk Sameth, a contemporary of Vann Molyvann, it is a recognised piece of Khmer New Architecture, initially built to house a factory producing condensed milk. Multinational company Nestlé later took over, while Kingdom Breweries in 2009 began renovating what at that point was an NGO-run soy milk producing facility into a state-of-the-art European brewery. Recognising the architectural value of the building, Peter Brongers says they tried to keep as much as possible in its original state, even restoring some of the original elements of the building. "Uk Sameth came to see the building recently and was very happy," he says.

Though both Peters currently focus mainly on getting their first beer out, plans are in place for expansion. Cambodian ingredients may in the future be used to create seasonal beers, such as mango or even peppercorn flavoured beverages. The two are also considering using rice instead of malt as a basis for another beer. "We need to find out if people like it," Hauptenthal says.

Key to Kingdom Breweries is quality. Calling the venture a boutique brewery, Brongers says he wants to create a beer brand with distinction. Beyond brewing premium pilsener, that also involves creating a distinct brand identity. "We want to be hip and classic at the same time," he says. "We also want to promote positive aspects of Cambodia." To celebrate the beauty and riddles of the country, the company has adopted four local endangered animals as their symbols – the clouded leopard, the pangolin, the impressed tortoise, and Cambodia's intriguingly elusive national animal, the kouprey.

Dedicated to the clouded leopard, the first pilsener will be presented to the public at the brewery's grand opening on Aug. 21.

*Kingdom Breweries, 1748 National Road 5, Tel. 023 430 180. For more information,*