



Jenna LaVita and
Victor Pultinas

FERMENTING A BREWERY

Former assistant winemaker Victor Pultinas opens Lake Drum Brewing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN SCHERER

IF YOU ASK WINEMAKERS WHAT THEY DRINK normally, I think the overwhelming answer would be beer,” says Ventosa Vineyards winemaker Jenna LaVita, explaining her partner Victor Pultinas’ motivation to enter the brewing business. “A lot of winemakers don’t go home to have a glass of wine. They seem to want to have a beer. I’ve always liked beer.”

This spring, Pultinas—a former assistant winemaker for Hosmer Winery and Sheldrake Point Vineyards—opened Lake Drum Brewing, Geneva’s first brewery since the advent of Prohibition. Lake Drum is a unique addition to the Finger Lakes’ ever-expanding craft beer scene, offering a gentle, creamy brew fermented in

red wine barrels. The facility also offers a book exchange, and Pultinas and LaVita hope that Lake Drum can become a focal point for area homebrewers.

Last year, Lake Drum won the City of Geneva Local Development Corporation’s “Race for the Space” contest. Their win gifted them with free rent for one year (along with a three-year lease) with space to choose from, a free redesign of the building’s façade, assistance with signage and marketing, a year of free membership with The Geneva Chamber of Commerce and a free year of advertising in *The Finger Lakes Times*.

Although he is now establishing himself as a brewer and previ-



Lake Drum Brewing is debuting with a hard cider and three IPAs



ously worked as an assistant winemaker, Pultinas didn't arrive in the Finger Lakes with the intention of finding a career on the wine trail. Having grown up in Boston's Mission Hill district, he studied arts and education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in the hopes of becoming an art therapist. He met LaVita—also a native of the Boston area and a political science major with her sights set on becoming a human rights lawyer—during his final semester. After graduation, Pultinas took a bike tour through Europe, and when he returned to Geneva, he and LaVita (who by now had decided to put law school on hold) decided to make a go at the wine industry. Pultinas had met Vinny and Kim Aliperti, co-owners of Billsboro Winery, at a Peace Corps informational meeting at Hobart and William Smith during his fourth year, and knew he wanted to work for them.

“They were so nice,” Pultinas recalls. “They had this product they made and that they were so proud of. They were just like, ‘We can do this! We’ve been here for however many years? Why not try to get into the wine industry?’” After an interview in which Pultinas showed up wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt and Birkenstocks, he was hired into Billsboro’s tasting room.

Billsboro co-owner Kim Aliperti recalls Pultinas’ salad days. “For the first month he worked for us, I’d come in and Victor would be working in his bare feet, which is of course against health code. It took about a month to convince him to keep his shoes on. Victor is a guy who marches to his own beat.”

Meanwhile, LaVita worked the harvest season at Fox Run Vineyards and Ventosa. During her time at Ventosa, LaVita developed a tight rapport with Eric Shatt, who was winery’s then-winemaker.



Following a brief stint working at a daycare as well as doing some office and tasting room work at Billsboro, LaVita landed the job as Ventosa's winemaker by complete fluke when Shatt departed for Cornell. Her quick ascension came as a surprise to many in the local industry, but not to Aliperti. "She's a super hard worker and a quick study. To her credit, she was always willing to talk to other winemakers and ask them their opinions, and work with other people."

At the exact same time LaVita landed her job at Ventosa, Pultinas was hired as an assistant winemaker at Hosmer. It was while working in their winemaking jobs that both Pultinas and LaVita would develop a serious interest in fermenting. "When we first started, we'd seen Riesling and done all these Riesling fermentations. It made us think, what else could we mess around with? When you first start out doing fermentation—and maybe

this is a young person's problem—you just want to try everything that no one has tried before," LaVita recalls. The duo went out and purchased an old cider press and began experimenting with various fruits and vegetables. "Being exposed to fermentations and being exposed to the science of fermentation inspired us to just try things on our own," Pultinas says.

Ultimately, this phase led Pultinas to brewing beer and fermenting cider. "They were the two most delicious products we tried," he says. "Out of all the things that we have experimented with, with things that are more everyday and widely consumed, not only were the beers the most marketable, but also the most enjoyable to drink." Pultinas had dabbled in homebrewing with friends during college, but learning to ferment gave him the know-how to brew.

As Pultinas and LaVita continued with their sundry fermentations,



Lake Drum's storefront on E. Castle Street in Geneva

tation experiments, Pultinas found himself growing increasingly disillusioned with the wine industry. He had always considered himself lucky to land his job at Hosmer in the first place, and never intended to cultivate a career from it. From Hosmer, he moved on to Sheldrake Point, and working both places involved an extensive commute to work. In the summer of 2012, Pultinas and LaVita purchased a house in Geneva's Hildreth Hill neighborhood, and it got Pultinas rethinking his priorities: "Why did I want to put so much time into being an assistant winemaker when I have no idea if I'm ever going to move up the ladder? It could be a year from now, it could be 10 years from now."

While working at Sheldrake Point, Pultinas heard about Ithaca's "Race for the Space" contest. By the time Pultinas had heard about it, the deadline to submit a proposal had already passed. But the idea of entering the contest got him thinking about opening his own brewery and made the possibility more feasible. When Geneva offered the same contest a year later, Pultinas threw his hat in the ring. Lake Drum Brewing was chosen over six other applicants.

"The concept was unique for Geneva," says Sage Gerling, director of Neighborhood Initiatives for the City of Geneva. "We don't have any breweries here, but it does fit in well with the wine and brewery trail you find in the Finger Lakes. We thought that Geneva would be a good place to have a nanobrewery, and Victor and Jenna had a well put-together business proposal. It was doable, but they needed assistance." More assistance came when the couple decided to crowd source funds. After a friend in Geneva successfully mounted a Kickstarter campaign, they decided to launch their own campaign on the website IndieGoGo (Kickstarter doesn't allow for beer tastings). They managed to raise just over \$12,000 after setting

an initial \$10,000 goal. "Geneva is self-supporting, which is why we decided to do it," LaVita says. "We closed our eyes and decided to let ourselves fall backwards. We thought that the chances of people catching us would probably be high. 'Let's take the risk and fall back and see if they do,' we thought. And they did."

Out of the gate, Lake Drum launched with one hard cider and three IPAs. Their hard cider is floral and fruity with hints of pear and lychee. The IPA has a baby-soft, easy mouthfeel with hints of banana and citrus on the nose. The double IPA is a hoppier, more traditional IPA with a bubblier mouthfeel and hints of pine and passion fruit. Finally, there's the Bellwood IPA, sweetened with maple syrup from Geneva's Bellwood Farm that gives way to a butterscotch taste and a creamy mouthfeel. Fermenting their brews in red wine barrels allows for a secondary fermentation that stainless steel tanks often do not. "Because you have it in a wine barrel, which is porous, certain turbines in the beer oxidize and change the overall flavor. In an airtight container, that would never happen," LaVita elaborates. Admittedly, it's also a marketing move. "It's weird that nobody around here has started to make beer in red wine barrels. It would seem like a no-brainer because you have so many around to do it. To people going through on wine tours, it's something you can market," LaVita opines.

Pultinas has cultivated his brews working with a German brewmaster from North Carolina he met via brewer friends from the Hudson Valley long distance. LaVita, who plans on retaining her winemaker position at Ventosa, will be lending her winemaking expertise in the quality control process. The couple hopes to host meetings for local homebrewers to share knowledge as well as help them evaluate their own concoctions. By making Lake Drum a focal point for area homebrewers, they hope to pick up feedback as well as some new ideas. "People have been making beer and cider here in Geneva and in the Finger Lakes for decades. There's a lot of young people making cider for the first time, but there's lots of people from older generations who have been making cider. It would be good to mix them all together to bring more knowledge to everybody, and to ourselves," Pultinas explains.

Following his exit from Sheldrake Point, Pultinas retreated back to his arts and education roots, working at the Boys & Girls Club of Geneva, and more recently, the Lochland School in Geneva. But he is excited about returning to the business of alcohol. "I know I'm saying this now, and I might be kicking myself later on, but I'm excited to be working 50 hours a week and really get into it."

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