

# BREWING U

## Food&Drink

**FIVE** years ago a flippant comment transformed the lives of two self-confessed "hop-heads" and saw the pair turn a passion into a promising career.

When Mike Walsh and Bob Yates met in a Nuneaton classroom, neither were aware that they would launch their own business and revive a tradition which has been absent for more than a hundred years.

In 2004, the lecturer and his pupil, who attended and ran the Beer Connoisseurs Club based at North Warwickshire and Hinckley College, took a gamble and turned their dream into a reality by creating the Tunnel Brewery.

And five years on, the dynamic duo have never looked back.

Situated behind the Good Beer Guide-listed Lord Nelson Inn, the Tunnel Brewery has brought back to life the traditional craft of hand-brewing local beers.

A year after starting their new venture, Mike and Bob produced their first brew, Light at the End of the Tunnel – a prophetically named bitter.

And after several challenging years, demand for their range of hand-crafted premium beers has increased dramatically and they are now toasting an increase in turn-over of 60 per cent in the past 18 months.

But just a few years ago, neither men ever imagined their enthusiasm for beer could create such a successful career.

Bob said: "I had been a member of a Beer Connoisseurs Club which was hosted by Mike, my business partner.

"Mike was a chef by trade and a chef lecturer at the college, in the evening he ran the beer connoisseur course. After 15 years a member of our group made the flippant comment that by now we could set up a brewery and start brewing our own beer that would rival the best ales out there."

Bob was then faced with a difficult decision. Should he continue his successful career as a designer of prototype electronic circuit boards, or follow his passion for brewing.

"I conducted some research into opening a micro-brewery and put together a business plan," added the 52-year-old businessman. "I ascertained that we needed to raise £30,000 for start-up costs and that we could obtain a grant from DEFRA."

Bob and Mike now own the majority of the business, but there are 15 shareholders many of whom came from the original Beer Connoisseurs Club, and are still actively involved in the brewery.

They believe it is this shared

IT'S BEEN a tough time for the UK pub industry. Already hammered by cheap supermarket beer and wine and the smoking ban, the recession has things even tougher.

But Warwickshire-based Tunnel Brewery is toasting success as demand for its traditionally brewed bottled beer continues to skyrocket.

JENNY WADDINGTON discovers how two brewing enthusiasts turned a passion into a successful business.



CHEERS... Colin Squire and Michael Walsh are toasting an increase in turn-over of 60 per cent in the past 18 months.

passion that imbues the brewery's selection of fine beers with their extraordinarily complex yet refreshing characteristics.

Mike and Bob now work full time on the business and they live and breathe the brewery.

Bob added: "We are a family business, my son David is employed part-time as a warehouse manager and my wife Linda helps with the farmers markets.

"We find farmers markets are excellent for feedback and for gauging the response of our product amongst our target consumers. I even named one of my beers after my wife, 'Linda Lear Beer'. We brewed it as a one-off special for her 50th birthday. The beer has the same characteristics as my wife – refreshing, fruity and slightly nutty. It was an instant success.

"As with most businesses it has been a rollercoaster ride for us so far, good times and bad. We didn't

see the recession coming and with over 600 micro-breweries in the UK there is a lot of competition, but there is also a lot of camaraderie amongst us.

"Fortunately the recession has actually helped our bottle sales as the consumer is increasingly looking for a quality beer to enjoy at home. Our bottle sales are actually up by 70 per cent over the past 18 months."

The Tunnel Brewery supplies its beers across the Midlands and sources all its hops and materials as locally as possible. Not only is this an environmentally friendly business model, but niche micro-breweries are playing an increasingly important role in employing local people and supporting the often rural communities in which they operate.

Equally the micro-brewery has played a part in the on-going success of The Lord Nelson Inn which sells its ales on tap. While many pubs are floundering, the Nelson Inn is vibrant and successful.

Mike said: "We offer guided tours and tastings at our micro-brewery and tourists come from around the world to try our beers. After a tour, the groups tend to enjoy the fantastic food on offer at the pub's restaurant. Equally many regulars come to the pub purely because they love our traditional ales".

With an impressive client list which includes local branches of Tesco's and Asda and an increasing demand from tourist organisations such as The National Trust, English Heritage and Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre, the light at the end of the tunnel is shining very bright for Tunnel Brewery.

Looking to the future Mike added:

● I even named one of my beers after my wife. Linda Lear Beer