

Character building

Brewery of Saint Mars of the Desert

BY ANTHONY GLADMAN

Visit enough small breweries and you'll soon become familiar with how these places look and feel. The rows of tanks and tuns. The hoses coiling across the floor. The pallets of malt sacks. But occasionally one stands out – and its unique character is worth exploring...

Perhaps it's something about a brewer's personality reflected in the place where they work day in, day out. Or it could be their vision of what beer means to them, expressed through the designs and artwork displayed in the taproom. Better still is when this unique character makes its way through to the beers themselves.

House character feels less elusive and ethereal than its close cousin, terroir. You're probably already thinking of a brewery that has it. But where does it come from? And can you build a brewery with character from the ground up?

Husband and wife Dann Paquette and Martha Holley-Paquette think you can. And they're working hard to build one together.

The couple opened Saint Mars of the Desert brewery in late 2018, three years after calling time on their successful cuckoo brewing venture, Pretty Things Beer & Ale Project. Dann and Martha left a comfortable life in Boston, Massachusetts, looking to put down roots somewhere new. They ended up in Attercliffe, a post-industrial corner of Sheffield, England opposite the imposing hulk of a defunct steel foundry. Their 800-hectolitre-per-year brewery occupies buildings that once housed its offices.



Welcome to Mars

My first impression on meeting Dann and Martha is one of generosity and warmth. Literally. I visited the brewery on a cold day in February and hadn't been there five minutes before Martha gave me a hat.

This is typical of how Dann and Martha operate, it turns out. The couple go out of their way to ensure visitors leave with a smile on their face. They offer rides to people who telephone asking how to find the brewery. When they close, they ferry customers on to other pubs in the city.

"We often end up giving people a lift somewhere when we're trying to kick them out of the taproom," says Martha. "We close kind of early."

Dominic Driscoll, Production Manager at Thornbridge, was an early fan of the brewery. He describes Dann and Martha as the hardest-working people going. "Brewing all week and then having to be nice to customers, it's hell on earth. But they're always there, they'll talk you through the beers, answer any questions. I just think they're lovely people."

Dann is in his early 50s, with salt-and-pepper hair and an accent that sits astride the Atlantic. Think Boston infused with some very British glottal stops. He arrived in Sheffield with a long history of brewing behind him. He began brewing in New England back in the 1990s. In his time, he saw many false starts before American craft beer



Brewery of Saint Mars of the Desert

90 Stevenson Road
Sheffield S9 3XG

early 2000s he worked for Daleside Brewery in Harrogate, where he says he used to get bossed around. “Really bossed around, in a way that we don’t have in America. There’s a hierarchy. And I thought: ‘that is the way to run a brewery’. Because things have to get done that you wouldn’t do. There are corners that need to be cleaned. There’s black mould that grows on everything. You need that. Control is the most important thing in a brewery.”

Control is so important to Dann and Martha that they have passed up opportunities many can only dream of. Would-be investors offered the couple \$10 million for a minority share of Pretty Things Beer & Ale Project, so they could build a brewery. The couple turned the offer down.

“First of all if wouldn’t have been \$10 million to us, it would have been \$10 million to build the brewery,” Martha explains, “we wouldn’t have seen that money.” Also, she says, it would mean a loss of ownership and control. “We would have worked for him, even though we would have still owned 51%. We would have worked there.”

“Crowdfunding is the scariest of them all because everyone’s got a little piece of you,” says Dann. He emphasises this with a pinching gesture, as if he were squeezing morsels of his own soul. The couple put on voices and imitate imaginary crowdfunding clients:

“Aw, you can open up a half an hour early for me! I gave you £50!”

“I’m coming into town! I’m bringing my mother!”

New old geometry

Dann and Martha have poured the profits from Pretty Things into building their 10-hectolitre brewhouse exactly the way Dann wants it. “The problem with modern brewing is everyone brews in the same equipment,” he says. The implication is this leads to beers that are too alike.

Dann says it is not American craft beers that inspire him, but by brewers

finally took off.

He is the head brewer at Saint Mars of the Desert, which means he comes up with all the recipes. Apart from this, the couple split the remaining work in the brewery evenly. Martha, a trained brewer herself, also screen-prints all the brewery’s artwork.

Martha has a PhD in Microbiology, and the couple met while she was working at Harvard. She is from Yorkshire, so seems less of an outsider than Dann at first. But it soon becomes clear that both of them are more interested in following their own path than fitting in. “He’s most comfortable when he’s being a punk,” says Martha, laughing at Dann.

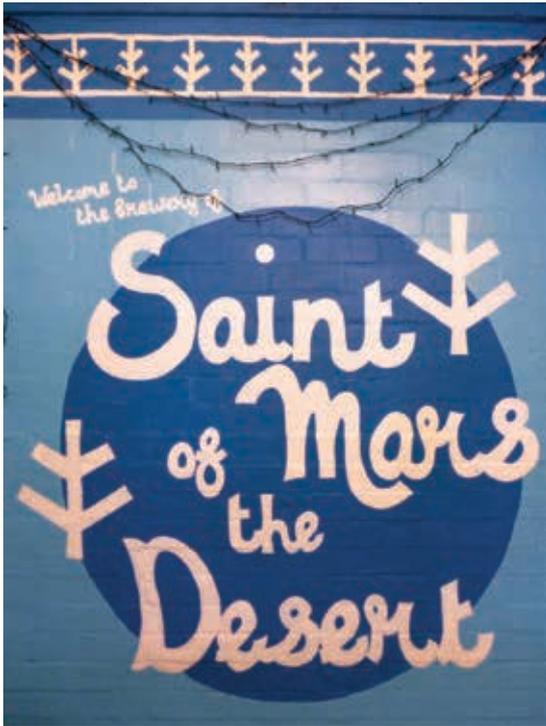
“We like to be outside and we like

to do things our way, because then we have more control over who we are,” says Dann.

Matt Dutton, Head Brewer at Manchester’s Track Brewing Co, isn’t so sure about the outsider label. In 2019 he collaborated with Martha and Dann to brew Cydonia, a hoppy hazy pale ale.

“Maybe they’re outsiders in that they have a different approach, a unique approach, to what beers they’re going to produce and how they’re going to produce them. But I’ve always found them super welcoming and open, and really fun guys to hang out with, so I wouldn’t say they’re outsiders.”

This is not Dann’s first time living and working in England. In the



like Kris Herteleer at Belgium's De Dolle. He explains that Herteleer took on a pre-existing brewery, filled with old equipment and unusual geometry, and incorporated these idiosyncrasies into the character of his beer.

"I tried to make that brewery, you know? I want that character. People talk about a sense of place in beer as if it's this mystical thing where you're going to collect microbes from the air. It's not. The brewery is the place so you should be able to taste it. We used to call that house character."

For example, Dann installed a coolship, but rather than making sour, spontaneously fermented beers, Dann uses his to brew lagers and pale ales. "If you go to Franconia, it's part of a brewhouse that would have existed probably until the 1940s or 50s," he says. "It's just a traditional piece of equipment. It happens to have this particular other use for Lambic, but most of the people who

are using coolships today are lager breweries in Germany."

Dann uses his coolship for hopping and says this is not as unusual as it might appear. "Think of a brewery like Theakston's. They have a vessel, I think it's underneath the kettle, and it's a square shallow vessel with a perforated bottom. They throw hops in and run the wort through that. It's a hop-back, but there's not a lot of difference between that and a coolship in that sort of situation."

Dann says his coolship is good for making clean beers in terms of DMS. "If you're making a lager and you're going to that vessel post-kettle instead of inside a whirlpool there's no DMS issue anymore, so it's better than the modern equipment where you necessarily have to use a whirlpool. We find it works really well."

Dann took other ideas from Franconia, too. Spunding is a process often used by lager brewers to car-

Beers are brewed in a 1,000 litre infusion brewhouse manufactured by Moeschle UK. "We have a gas fired kettle and a koelschip that we're using primarily for 'koel-hopping' and general cooling, though one day soon we hope to begin inoculating fresh wort using it... so stay tuned for that." (Photo: Saint Mars of the Desert)





The brewery's 20 hL fermentation vessels are rated to 3 bar



Handtmann 'spunding' (or bunging) pressure relief valves enable carbonation using the CO₂ produced during primary fermentation

bonate beer naturally by fermenting it under pressure. Dann has fermentation vessels rated to 3 bar, which is unusually high for a British brewery but common in Germany and the Czech Republic.

He has fitted his fermenters with spunding valves, which allow him to set the pressure at which they will vent. Dann says his spunded beers have a softer, finer carbonation which leads to a smooth and silky mouthfeel. "It's so fine it's almost like sherbert," says Martha. Yeast fermenting under pressure produces glycerine (glycerol), which also helps with the mouthfeel. And finally, because this process is more gentle on the beer, it leads to better head retention.

But, being Dann, he has not left it there. He combines spunding with dry hopping, which keeps the hop character locked into the beer.

"Every little bubble is impregnated with all those things that would happen during the fermentation that would otherwise be lost," says Dann.

"You don't lose anything," adds Martha. "Any aroma that the yeast produces during that fermentation after you seal the tank is going to be kept, it's trapped in the tank."

Dann also has a bright beer tank with a mixer fitted, allowing for secondary fermentation in bottles, and an

oxygen meter. Breweries of this size seldom have these two pieces of equipment given their high cost.

"They've invested heavily in quality mechanisms which means they've got that reproducibility, they can do a consistent beer if they wanted to," says Driscoll. "The same way that we've got this state-of-the-art lab at Thornbridge, they've got a mini version of that. They've got expertise to do it properly, they've got the expertise and the knowledge, and they're applying it to this fabulously independent, no-corporate-bullshit brewery."

Making characterful beer isn't just a matter of what you brew in, or how you brew. The process doesn't begin when you mash in, or even when you adjust your water chemistry or set your strike temperature. Brewing begins when a brewer first dreams up a beer. And for Dann this is an opportunity to follow his own path rather than retread the steps of others.

"There is a herd element to craft brewers and getting out of that herd is important," he says. "Not knowing what other people are doing is really good. If I were looking at somebody's Landsbier Hell online, it would drive me crazy. I'd want to make it."

But tuning out what he describes as 'all the noise, all the internet stuff' is harder than it sounds. The trick,



Signs from French and German breweries evoke a classic, timeless feeling, as if when you take your seat in the taproom you are settling into a modern part of a long and old tradition



Beer is packaged for on-trade in 20- and 30-litre key kegs

he says, is to use your own personality. “What do I actually like? There are a million and a half breweries in this world, we don’t need them all. What are you adding to this?” Dann explains that any idiosyncrasy or bias you have should find its way into your process and your beer. “Be that brewery. You have a brewery for a reason. What is it?”

Chasing a good life

Dann and Martha have known both success and failure in the beer trade before now. Neither one is naïve to the economic realities of making a living from selling beer. Yet the shift from cuckoo brewers to brewery owners, and from the USA to the UK, has still thrown up some surprises for the couple.

“We knew we weren’t going to be rich when we built this brewery,” says Martha. “We weren’t completely

stupid. We knew it was going to be a struggle, but we did think we would be able to pay ourselves given the success we’ve had. We sell every drop that we brew now, but we’re still not paying ourselves. Something’s wrong there, isn’t it?”

Martha says the couple hadn’t realised how hard it is to make a profit here in the UK. Much of this is down to the proportion of sales revenue eaten up by VAT and duty payments. Beer duty in the UK is seven times what they paid while brewing in the USA. Sales tax on the beer in the USA was zero.

“The VAT in the taproom is killer,” says Dann. “Taprooms are really good for making money in the US. Here you’re paying tax on tax. That blows my mind.”

Martha laughs in agreement. “We haven’t made a profit so far. If we knew the numbers that we’re looking at every day now I don’t think we could

ever do it. We would be stupid to do it,” she says.

But despite this, the couple say they are not afraid of failing.

“We’ve had that conversation,” says Martha. “We might well fail. And if we do, we’ll have tried. We could have taken that money – it was a lot of money to build our brewery – and we could have done other, much more sensible things with it.

“And we didn’t just do it without thinking that through. But at the end of the day it was the one thing that Dann has always wanted. Imagine being on your deathbed knowing that you didn’t do it when you could have done it. So, I’ll never regret it. It’ll be alright.”

There is as much mystique to Dann and Martha’s brewing as there is technique. Together they are building not just a brewery but a world. They are working towards a shared vision of a good life. Walking into their tiny taproom in Sheffield is like stepping through the wardrobe into an adult, beer-themed Narnia. In the winter, a log-burner set against the back wall warms chilled feet and souls. In the summer, planters brighten the post-industrial courtyard outside. They soften its hard edges, turning it into a welcoming space for young and old alike.

“You feel at home in there,” says Driscoll. “It feels like a local pub. The Cloudwater lot have turned up. Ron Pattinson will be there, come over from Amsterdam. We’ve had some lovely days in there.”

The walls hold signs taken from old French and German breweries. They evoke a classic, timeless feeling, as if when you take your seat you are settling into a modern part of a long and old tradition. Beer books piled in corners speak of the couple’s passion for this world of hops and barley. Their taproom, with its screen-printed and hand-painted designs, reflects Dann and Martha’s personalities in a way you cannot fake. There’s music, played on vinyl, and then there are the beers.

“They’re super clean and technically well produced, which is great for a brewer because often you don’t find that,” says Dutton. “They’re to style, and a really good representation of that style.”

From another planet

With its other-worldly name, this brewery feels like it could have come from anywhere. Perhaps we should be thankful that it ended up here in the UK.

ST MARS BEERS



KOEL RUNNINGS – A New England Pale Ale. Hops: Rakau and Waimea hops. Hazy, gently juicy, easy drinking pale ale.



CLAMP – Flagship hoppy beer. A New England style IPA, low bitterness, high on the fruity juicy aromas. Hazy. Hops: Waimea and Mosaic.



URCHIN WITBIER – A classic take on a Belgian wheat beer, with bitter orange peel and coriander and unmalted wheat. This gives a hazy, very pale, very light beer perfect for drinking on a sunny day.



MIEL – A seasonal beer, brewed with local Sheffield honey

During their travels, Dann and Martha considered settling down in the tiny French village from which they took their brewery's name. It would have been a remote location. Saint-Mars-du-Désert, southwest of Alençon in the Loire, recorded a population of just 167 people in 2017.

"We found a cheap farm, and we fell in love with it," Martha tells me. "At that time we wanted a retreat from the world. I think we had an idea that we would become this crazy little farmhouse brewery that people would seek out. And then common sense prevailed, and we realised if three people sought us out in a year, we'd be lucky."

For Dann and Martha, the beer comes first and the business comes second. Dutton describes Dann and Martha as purists. "They know that they wouldn't be happy doing it a different way just for a financial gain, and that's very admirable. There are not many UK breweries who you can say are the same. It's pretty fierce competition out there."

Martha says Dann's dream was to become like an austere Belgian or German brewer. The sort who makes only one beer and spends his lifetime slowly perfecting its recipe over countless repeated brews. "The greatest brewery in the world would only make one beer," he says. "And no one's achieved that yet."

Martha's views on the matter were more down-to-earth. "When Dann says we were going to brew one beer, I absolutely knew we were not," she says, laughing. "I could have told you that," she says, turning to Dann. "In

fact, I think I did say that, and you were like 'well, whatever, I'm gonna make one beer.'"

Maybe this is what house character comes down to: the magic that a skilled brewer with a head full of dreams can coax out of his or her equipment. Creativity often flourishes when it is set to work within a framework. For brewers that may be the quirks of a brewhouse or the singularity of their inner vision.

"Finally, I have a black-and-white idea of what a good beer is," says Dann. "It took me 25 years to get there, even though I had it but didn't know I had it."

I ask Dann if he has come close to brewing this ideal beer, and he pauses

for a moment. A slow and thoughtful 'no' comes out almost as a sigh, then he laughs. "I don't know," he says. "I always think the beers to come are going to be better."

Martha is more upbeat and retains some perspective on the process. Maybe because she doesn't have to dream the beers up. "Like any brewer, you are occasionally really pleased with a beer. It never lasts past about a day," she says to Dann, with an edge of gentle teasing. "You always find something you could make better with it. But are we making the best beers of our careers to date? Yes, we are."

Dann agrees with this, at least. "We've made some of the best beers, definitely."



The Saint Mars team: Brewers Martha Holley-Paquette and Dann Paquette