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Wiedemann beer returns to Newport

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Rick Wanger (right), the great-great grandson of German immigrant George Wiedemann, joined Jon Newberry and Tyler Hill for an inaugural keg-tapping at Pompilio's in Newport. / Tony Tribble for The Enquirer

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NEWPORT — Wiedemann beer is coming back to Newport – with a new recipe, new owners and a new logo, but in the same tradition that made the lager a local staple for more than a century.

Created by German immigrant George Wiedemann and brewed in Newport from the 1880's until 1983, the Bohemian-style lager was beloved by beer drinkers across Northern Kentucky, especially among working-class men.

It was also a significant source of local pride: the five-acre brewery was once among the largest and most technologically-advanced in the nation, and it employed hundreds of people. Bars across Newport still bear signs with the old Wiedemann logo in tribute to the city's rich brewing past, though Wiedemann beer hasn't been sold since 2007.

Now, the iconic name has been resurrected by a local journalist and beer aficionado, Jon Newberry, who crafted a new recipe modeled on the original Wiedemann beer.

"I always liked Wiedemann, and I would have hated to see somebody come back with some lousy, crummy beer, slap a Wiedemann label on it, and the opportunity would be gone," Newberry said.

"As soon as I figured out that there was an opportunity to bring back Wiedemann, I thought, 'I'll be kicking myself until the day I die if I didn't jump on it and do it.' So here we are," said Newberry, who had reported on the beer industry since 1986 for publications such as the Cincinnati Business Courier,

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Newberry and his wife Betsy have created the Geo. Wiedemann Brewing Co. and are in the process of acquiring the trademark to the Wiedemann name after its previous owners, the Pittsburgh Brewing Co., allowed their ownership of the trademark to expire.

Their new Wiedemann's Special Lager is a crisp, flavorful, light-bodied pilsner developed with Listermann Brewing Company in Evanston. It has hints of the old Wiedemann flavor, but with a fresher, crisper taste.

"This is the kind of beer that George Wiedemann, back in his day, would have made and would have been happy to put his name on," Newberry said.

The first keg was ceremonially tapped Friday, though Wiedemann's Special Lager has been on tap at Pompilio's Italian Restaurant in Newport for two weeks. Rick Wagner, the great-great grandson of George Wiedemann, did the honors.

"I think it's wonderful to see it come back. I've been waiting for somebody to do it," said Wagner, 72, of East Walnut Hills. "It's a good beer. I like it: good flavor, and just the right amount of hops."

Wiedemann's Special Lager will be distributed by Chas. Seligman Distributing Co. in Walton, another Northern Kentucky beer empire.

"I love the fact that they've taken an old name and created a new beer," said Seligman craft beer manager Tyler Hill. "Everything that craft beer is doing right now is really focused on local stuff, and this is taking local to a new level, because you're essentially resurrecting this old brand. Aside from the fact that the beer is a great beer, I think it's a great idea: they're taking the old and mixing it with the new and creating this whole new landscape."

Locally-brewed beer has been enjoying a renaissance in Greater Cincinnati: in 2004, the Christian Moerlein Brewing Co. resurrected old local brands like Hudy Delight and Burger, and in 2010 the company brought some of its brewing operations back to the Over-the-Rhine brewery district.

Distribution of Wiedemann's Special Lager will start small: it is currently produced in seven-barrel batches and will be available only at select Northern Kentucky locations known for their attention to draft and craft beers. If it catches on, the Newberrys hope to increase production and begin selling the new Wiedemann in bottles and cans.

"I have no doubt that it's going to do well," said Seligman general manager Jennifer Doering. "The nostalgia of the name will ring with some of the folks that remember actually drinking it, but the style and the recipe and the taste is going to really resonate with the

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younger consumer who doesn't want to drink a mass-produced beer, and they'll feel something because it's actually local."

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