

Built like a brick brew-house

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- Photo by Harry Gerwien

Phil Smith, owner of Brick Anchor Brew-House.



- Photo by Harry Gerwien

Brick Anchor will feature 60 craft beers on tap, including 20 local and state brews that will be featured front-and-center on the downstairs bar.



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While contemplating a name for his new restaurant, Phil Smith found inspiration in his beard.

“I was sitting in front of my computer in Syracuse, N.Y., and there was 18 inches of snow on the ground,” Smith said. “I’d grown a beard, and it was itching like crazy.”

Instead of shaving, Smith had a lightbulb moment.

And that's how "I'll meet you for a drink at Itchy Phil's" almost became something people in Norfolk said.

Almost.

After further reflection, Smith decided to name his new enterprise, the Brick Anchor Brew-House. The name pays tribute to the ubiquitous bricks of downtown and gives a nod to Norfolk's nautical heritage. But there's also a wink and a tip of the cap to his hometown, Buffalo's Anchor Bar, inventor of buffalo wings.

The Granby Street restaurant finally opens this week after many months of renovations, delays and detours. Once you step inside, it becomes clear what took Smith and his team so long.

The building at the corner of Granby and W. Tazewell has been transformed from its past life as Jack Quinn's Irish Pub. The interior of Brick Anchor is a striking showcase of steampunk-inspired design, blending industrial elements from the turn of the 20th century. Smith described the aesthetic as a mix of nautical, railroad and airship details, with a dash of Jules Verne whimsy.

During the day, the downstairs dining room is brilliantly lit by tall windows. At night, a menagerie of fabricated steel fixtures and reclaimed electrical insulator glass candleholders add to the atmosphere. The bar rises in the center of it all, a rich wood temple of carved detail, mirrors and metal clocks.

But as elaborate and eye-catching as the interior design is, the beating heart of the Brick Anchor is its beer selection.

The downstairs bar will feature 50 craft beers on tap, including 20 local and state-brewed brands that will always be featured front-and-center. Another 10 beers will be available at the bar in the upstairs tasting room, making the selection the largest in Norfolk.

Brick Anchor also will offer stainless steel growlers for patrons who want their brews to go.

Beer is what brought Smith – a native of Buffalo and a retired lieutenant colonel with the U.S. Army – back to Hampton Roads. After he was stationed at Fort Monroe in the late '90s, Smith spent eight years in Germany.

“I developed a passion for beer,” Smith said. “And I knew that, when I ‘grew up,’ I wanted to be involved in some kind of business that sold beer.”

After more work with the Army and some time in corporate America, Smith found himself ready to try something new. With all of their kids on their own at work or college, Smith and his wife, Kathy, left New York for Virginia in June 2015.

Smith decided that breaking into the beer business required some backup, so he joined forces with his younger brother, “a real estate magnate” who lives in Buffalo.

Originally, the Smith brothers planned to open a franchise. They were looking seriously at companies such as World of Beer, a Tampa-based craft beer chain that boasts a staggering selection of global brands. Their plan was to find some prime end-cap space in a shopping center in Virginia Beach.

When their property searches came up short, Smith said that his local Realtor suggested they take a closer look at downtown Norfolk.

At first, Smith balked. He may have even used some profanity.

Then he visited and had a change of heart.

“My perspective of downtown was from 1996,” Smith said. “I remember it as crime-ridden, deserted and not very business-friendly. But when I came down, I was struck by the energy and the vibrancy. It had everything you look for when analyzing space for a new business.”

The building that would become Brick Anchor Brew-House helped Smith change his mind about franchises and brought about a new business strategy.

“I thought, let’s build something that’s ours, but along a franchiseable business model,” Smith said. “Our goal is to open three locations in the area over the next 10 years.”

Getting the doors open on the first location was not without its challenges. In addition to transforming the interior and the kitchen, Smith upgraded the entire HVAC system, installed a massive beer cooler downstairs, and added accordion doors and sidewalk seating. Smith said that building a stairwell to the third floor almost “took an act of Congress.”

But as he showed off the nearly finished result of more than a year of hard work, all that remained were a few coats of paint and minor mechanical details.

The 6,400-square-foot space can seat 165 and includes a main dining room, a mezzanine, a more casual “Tesla Lounge” and a third-floor tasting room and event space. The restaurant will offer lunch, dinner and weekend brunch.

In addition to the eccentric and unique art on display, General Manager Michael Gasset created a menu to match.

“We didn’t want to do average pub fare,” Gasset said. “We wanted the food to be approachable and recognizable. ... We call it ‘grandma’s kitchen on steroids.’”

The idea is traditional comfort food with a twist. Sophisticated casual with an emphasis on house-made, locally sourced and sustainable ingredients. Chef Ed Speller and his staff will create much of the selection on site, from fresh-baked breads and pastries to house-made bacon and pastrami.

And of course, at least one-third of the menu will incorporate beer as an ingredient.

Gassett also mentioned that twice a year, Brick Anchor will house a “Taste of Virginia” dinner, showcasing culinary creations crafted from 100 percent made-in-the-commonwealth ingredients.

“A lot of restaurants are cashing in on that local and sustainable angle,” Gassett said.

“But we live it.”

After a series of invitation-only soft openings and trial runs, the Brick Anchor Brew-House plans to open to the public March 12.

“We think what we have to offer will be a great addition to the downtown dining scene,” Smith said. “We want the Brick to be considered downtown’s kitchen.”

For more photos, go to InsideBiz.com.