

# ATLANTA'S SWEET WATER

THE FOUNDERS OF OUR LOCAL SWEETWATER BREWING COMPANY  
KEEP IT SIMPLE AND EARTH FRIENDLY.

[ WRITTEN BY LISSA HARNISH POIROT ]



**H**OOCH HAS A LOT OF MEANING IN OUR PART OF THE WORLD. While the most obvious refers back to Georgia's days of Prohibition, dry counties and moonshine, Hooch is also the nickname for the beloved red clay-colored river that runs through our state. Flowing from the North Georgia Mountains, dissecting Atlanta and winding its way through the countryside, the Chattahoochee River is our source of pleasure – fishing, kayaking, rafting, tubing – and of our vitality – it keeps our farms irrigated and provides us with drinking water. It is also important to the founders and owners of Atlanta's own SweetWater Brewery, who have not only built their lives around the river, but who work tirelessly to ensure generations will continue to live off of and enjoy the Chattahoochee.

#### East-Coast Bound

Freddy Bensch and Kevin McNerney were your stereotypical Colorado college boys. When not attending classes at the University of Colorado, Boulder, they were enjoying the spoils of mountain life – skiing in the winter; hiking, mountain biking, rafting and fishing in the summers; and enjoying ice-cold, Colorado-brewed pints at the end of the day. Food, fun and frolicking doesn't come cheap, so Bensch and McNerney took jobs at local brewing companies to earn some dough and enjoy, as Bensch puts it, the "fringe benefits." Instead of being a temporary gig, the men became fascinated by the brewing process and decided then and there brewing beer was what they wanted to do with their lives.

"We worked in the brewery for about three to four years learning everything there was to learn about brewing beer," said Bensch, SweetWater's resident "Big Kahuna." "Our positions at the brewery gave us the production background we needed to start SweetWater."



Graduating from school and heading east in search of greener pastures in which to set up a hop shop, a simple twist of fate had their truck breaking down in Atlanta, where the duo began exploring and falling in love with its opportunities for outdoor exploration in the mountains and along the Chattahoochee. By the age of 24 Bensch and McNerney had found their home. Next, they needed a product.

"We wanted something distinct from the other beers, not ordinary, so we started with a recipe, added yeast, and brewed it to





#### BREWERY TOURS

Sample the award-winning brews at SweetWater's brewery, featuring 49,000 barrels. Tours are conducted every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 5:30 p.m. Twenty-minute tours end in the brewery's bar, where samples and merchandise are available. Visit the brewery at 195 Ottley Drive in Midtown, or call 404-691-2537 for more information.

capture something we wanted to drink," Bensch said.

The result, their signature pale ale, was released on April 20, 1997 – Earth Day – for which it is aptly named: 420.

#### The Little Beer That Could

But loving beer and creating a successful business didn't go hand in hand, so instead of focusing on the business, the duo aimed to create a great product and live their dream.

"Our early years were somewhat daunting. The only thing we knew well was how to make beer. Our positions at the brewery were in production, and in school we learned simply the art of making beer. We didn't know a thing about distribution and business, which is one half of the business," Bensch said. "But our curse was more a blessing. By not knowing, we were and are able to create as we go. And in the process, we've created our own culture."

That culture isn't one of 9 to 5 hours and business suits. And it isn't about trying to dominate the world of beer and sell out to the highest bidder. SweetWater's motto, "Don't Float the Mainstream," is truly the philosophy of the team behind the brewery,

now including Brew Master Mark Medlin, "Money Man" Bill Burge, "Minister of Propaganda" (Marketing) Steve Farace, "Party Girl and Tasting Room Manger" Katy Roland, and a sales team with staff referred to on business cards as the "Parole Officer," "Sweet Life Pusher," "Beer Pimp," "Seller of Good Times" and "Funky Brewster."

What began as a duo has grown into 45 dedicated SweetWater staff that is also committed to enjoying life to the fullest. Besides brewing beer, the staff is encouraged to dress casually, take time off for enjoying a sunny day on the river, and promote the SweetWater "vibe" with road trips and parties like its annual 420 Fest in Atlanta's Candler Park to coincide with Earth Day.

"We don't measure our success in terms of growth but by quality of life," Bensch said. "We don't want to grow too fast that it affects the culture here at the brewery. We're in this for the long haul and we've never focused on quick success. Our goal was to be in the Southeast region and in our 12 years we're only in 13 markets. That's right where we want to be."

There is no magic formula for the beers the company brews, either. Instead, the developers "crib it and rip it." "We often come up with ideas for a new beer just by writing it down on a napkin. Sometimes it needs a little tweaking, but sometimes we're lucky and it comes out perfect the first time, like our newest beer, Motorboat," Bensch said.

Like many local brewers, SweetWater rotates its beers by the season. Its "Catch and Release" brews are what the brewers refer to as their "crazy, one-off" draft-only beers available in the brewery for a limited run, such as the full-figured Happy Ending through March, and Road Trip, a pilsner/ale combination beginning in April and available through the summer.

While focusing on making good beer and developing a company that would be fun to work for, the SweetWater staff was surprised when bigger breweries and

masses beyond the borders of Georgia took note. In 2003, the local Atlanta brewery was named “Small Brewery of the Year” at the Great American Beer Festival — the first and only brewery east of the Mississippi to win what Bensch calls the “Superbowl of Brewing.” Since, SweetWater continues to garner awards for brews like Georgia Brown, SweetWater Blue, and, of course, 420.

### **Protecting the Waters**

With a passion for the outdoors, and using the waters flowing directly through the city in its recipes, SweetWater is a staunch supporter of environmental organizations, including Save the Hooch and the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper. Both organizations work to protect the river, its tributaries and watershed in order to maintain ecological health for people, fish and wildlife.

“If you look at our brand, it revolves around the outdoors. I’m an avid fly fisherman and kayaker and I love to be outdoors. It’s who we are as people, and our brand is an extension of who we are,” Bensch said. “The river is going through an extreme challenge and we want to promote awareness of these organizations and what they are doing and help raise funds.”

SweetWater also remains committed to the environment through national and local initiatives, such as the Carbon Neutral Partnership, and working to restore the beauty of Atlanta through its two-day Earth Day anniversary festivals. The fifth annual SweetWater 420Fest will celebrate with good brews, live music and arts in Candler Park, April 18 and 19.

“This is a celebration of both Earth Day and our brewery and it’s a family-gear community festival,” Bensch said. “We bring in a lot of environmental aspects and mix it with great music and kids activities.”

Admission is free for the festival’s live music, crafts, eco-oriented activities and educational experiences. Festivalgoers 21 and over can purchase a \$5 wristband for SweetWater beer and wine, with wristband sales going to the Candler Park Neighborhood Association to make improvements to Candler Park. SweetWater’s Planet 420 village will offer visitors a chance to learn ways to be earth friendly at home and in the community.

It’s just another way Bensch and his fellow SweetWater team can show their love for Atlanta and keep the city beautiful for all to enjoy. Of course, they’re happy to show their love in the form of a good pint – pull up a chair, sample what makes this small-town brewery so successful, and ask for Bensch. He’s always willing to share his passions and a glass of ale. **PN**



### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

For information on SweetWater and its SweetWater 420Fest, visit [www.sweetwaterbrew.com](http://www.sweetwaterbrew.com) or [www.sweetwater420fest.com](http://www.sweetwater420fest.com).