

# WHAT'S BREWING IN PORT REXTON



**DENNIS FLYNN  
TAKES US INSIDE  
ONE OF THE  
PROVINCE'S  
NEWEST  
MICROBREWERIES.**



## PAST THE SPECTRAL TREE

Dennis Flynn photos

scraping the sky, its branches reaching for cumulus clouds, I spot the T-Rex resting on low haunches in the peaceful valley. I have no fear as I approach. I am, in fact, filled with anticipation, for the T-Rex is not an ancient predator but the former Port Rexton community centre – now the home of Port Rexton Brewing Company.

Inside, sunlight falls upon a dark wood, acoustic guitar cozying up to a glass cabinet showcasing vintage growlers (small glass jugs once used to carry draught beer bought by the measure at local pubs) from around the world. I smell something remi-

niscient of the clinging hops vines that once grew in my grandmother's yard. There is the echo of banter and the clink of glasses as a small group a few minutes ahead of me concludes their tour. Near the entrance to the taproom, two long wooden tables





**Above: The lounge where customers relax with a Port Rexton brew**

**Below: Microbrewery partners, Sonja Mills (left) and Alicia MacDonald**



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**The brew process is on full display, part of the facility's attraction.**

with eight red chairs apiece coexist with a pair of plush, green armchairs in a companionable space ringed with local artwork under firefly-like lighting. At the rear, at least a half-dozen huge, stainless-steel cylinders dominate a railed-off lower area in the open-concept production space.

A chalkboard behind the bar announces today's five varieties of beer: Gardeners Gose, Sweater Weather Smash DIPA (Double India Pale Ale), Baycation Blonde, Horse Chops IPA (India Pale Ale), and (my eventual personal favourite) T-Rex Porter. (During my tour, I learn that the Gardeners Gose is actually a relatively rare treat of a beer, using coriander from the greenhouses at nearby Fishers' Loft as a substitute spice instead of hops.)

This facility, one of several microbreweries now operating in Newfoundland and Labrador, opened last July and has been enjoying a very warm welcome. I'm lucky the owners can sneak away for a chat with me about the brewing business.

The talented beer aficionados

behind Port Rexton Brewing are business (and life) partners Sonja Mills and Alicia MacDonald, both of whom have extensive experience with microbreweries in Nova Scotia. They were motivated to set up operations in Port Rexton after recent visits to Sonja's hometown of nearby Clarendville.

"We had a personal connection to the area, as I knew growing up and hiking around here how beautiful it is and all the tourism potential," says Sonja. "We were married nearby three years ago at English Harbour and knew we would love to move back to the area. It turned out this building was available, and it went from there." She adds, "I was actually in this building when I was in Grade 7 for a dance, so I did know about it. I guess it is kind of full circle to come back here. Of course, beer is now legal in it."

Alicia is a nurse practitioner-turned brewmaster. When I ask her why they chose Port Rexton, she

replies "Why not?" She explains, "When we were living in Halifax we were initially thinking of opening a brewery near Truro, Nova Scotia and had really researched the idea and saw the great opportunities, but after we relocated to Newfoundland we fell in love with this place."

The location was ideal for them, Alicia says, being on the Trinity Bay side of the peninsula, and when they learned this vacant building was in danger of being torn down, they decided it needed to be saved. "So that is what we did and it has worked out great."

It's only been a year, but the brewery has been running full tilt.

"We brew about five times per month and that is based on the size of our fermenters. We have three fermenters and the beer sits in them for about two weeks to two-and-a-half weeks, and when it is ready to move we brew again," Alicia explains. "Every batch of beer is, on average, about 450 litres."

## THIRSTY FOR MORE?

Here are other makers of local beers in NL

### Western Newfoundland Brewing Co. • Pasadena

Now you have another reason to go to Western Newfoundland – to sample the locally made, locally available Wild Cove Cream Ale and Killdevil Pale Ale.

[WesternNewfoundlandBrewing.ca](http://WesternNewfoundlandBrewing.ca)

### Bootleg Brew Co. • Corner Brook

New this summer, this microbrewery's offerings include East Coast Pale Ale, Happy Roger India Pale Ale and El Diablo Rojo.

[www.facebook.com/BootlegBrewCo](http://www.facebook.com/BootlegBrewCo)

### Scud Runner Brewing • Gander

New this summer (hopefully). As of press time, this fledgling operation was eyeing a June start date to launch their line of locally brewed ale, lager, kolsch, bitter and porter.

[ScudRunnerBrewing.ca](http://ScudRunnerBrewing.ca)

### Quidi Vidi Brewery • St. John's

Home of such fan favourites as 1892 Traditional Ale, Eric's Cream Ale and Iceberg Beer, Quidi Vidi (est. 1996) is a gastro staple in the Newfoundland and Labrador market, and a popular destination in historic Quidi Vidi village.

[QuidiVidiBrewery.ca](http://QuidiVidiBrewery.ca)

### YellowBelly Brewery • St. John's

There's always something exciting on tap at this brewery pub on George Street, from its classic YellowBelly Pale Ale, to its St. John's Stout, Fighting Irish Red Ale and its latest (as of press time), Brewis Hard Tack Ale.

[YellowbellyBrewery.com](http://YellowbellyBrewery.com)

### Storm Brewing • Mount Pearl

You'll find these craft brews on tap and in stores all around the capital city. Look for Irish Newfoundland Red Ale, Island Gold Ale, Raspberry Wheat and (in the winter only) Coffee Porter. Storm Brewing, to many older drinkers' delight, brought back the "stubby" in 2004 and introduced the mainland "long necks" to the NL market.

[StormBrewing.ca](http://StormBrewing.ca)

She adds, "We have been very pleased with the first year and gotten visitors from all over the globe, and even some well-known beer world writers/celebrities who have been great. If you can't get out to Port Rexton in season [the facility is open to the public May to October], we are starting to have our beer on tap in St. John's at places like Mallard Cottage, Adelaide Oyster House and Merchant Tavern."

As I'm enjoying my sample beverage as part of the tour, I look around and wonder on the building's history. Alicia explains that before this was a community centre, it had been a school. The "T-Rex" was a nod to the school's principal, Tom Rex. That gets me thinking.

"Did you keep any school notes found during the conversion to a brewery?" I casually ask Alicia.

She gives me a very curious glance before replying, "What makes you say that?"

Recalling my school-age mischief and minor romances, I confess, "Because I, and almost any of the kids I grew up with in rural Newfoundland, would have passed a few notes in class. At least a few of them would have been lost or confiscated by the teachers or simply left behind."

Without another word, Alicia departs and returns a few minutes later with a small box filled with aging scraps of paper. Smiling, she explains, "We found most of these hidden behind the stairs. It must have been a bit of a secret location for the kids to pass messages. There were a lot of them."

As I pick through the box, I see the



Visitors get a tour of Port Rexton Brewing, including a peek at notes left behind by students of this former school building.



wrappers of Big Turk bars and other treats of the day. There are a child's drawings of a woman with a 1950s-era beehive hairdo and an assortment of fashions. There is a letter in swirling script dated September 22, 1964: "Judy Bradley, I guess you are mad with me, but I don't care. So you know I am mad with you, too. (Ha) (Ha), Linda." I grin and hope that after 53 years Judy and Linda are no longer mad at each other.

My favourite item takes up a full sheet of fading beige paper. In blue ink, in upper and lower case letters, a youthful hand had written: "You and I have a game of cowboys after school."

As we continue digging through this treasure box, we gain the attention of several visitors. Together we smile and laugh at these childish notes and share our own stories over our sample beverages. It's a spontaneous gathering of new friends to talk about old times.

At the end of the day, it's only fitting to raise my glass and toast to the health of the Port Rexton Brewing Company.

Long may they taste success. ☺