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Founding Fathers Lager--beer with a cause

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50% of profits goes to support the troops

Philanthropy in the beer industry is nothing new. Since the 1800s, giving back to the community has been an important part of what brewers do. The Pabst, Miller, Blatz, and Busch families were all major benefactors in their day. Today the Boston Beer Company has its Brewing the American Dream program to support small businesses, and it also partners with a number of charitable foundations. Here in the Twin Cities, Surly supports the Emergency Foodshelf Network and others with the Surly Gives A Damn program, Fulton devotes 10 percent of its profits to micro-loans for startups with its Ful-10 fund, and Finnegan's donates 100 percent of its profits to worthy causes. And that's just a small sampling.

Now there's a new do-gooder in the local brew scene. Founding Fathers Lager hit the shelves last November with a promise to donate 50 percent of its profits to organizations that support the troops.

Founding Fathers Brewing Company is the brainchild of entrepreneur Phil Knutsen. After 22 years in a corporate job, he felt it was time for a career change. He wanted to create a business that would give back to the community. Knutsen was inspired by the example of the Paul Newman Foundation, the company founded by the late actor that donates the profits from its salad dressing and pasta sauce sales to charities. But unlike the Newman Foundation, which gives money to a wide range of causes, he wanted to take a more focused approach. After kicking around a few ideas he hit upon soldiers and their families as the cause. "I wanted something that customers could rally around and that logged into the name of the company, Founding Fathers Products," Knutsen says. "The military seemed like a perfect fit."

Knutsen stresses that he is not making "craft beer." Founding Fathers Lager is an American-style lager beer meant to appeal to the mass-market consumer. Armed with marketing data showing that 80 percent of consumers will choose a cause-marketing product when presented with two equal,

competing products, he is putting his beer up against the big boys. "The initial idea was something like Heinz Ketchup," he explained in a recent interview. "If there is a bottle of Heinz Ketchup on the shelf next to another one called Founding Fathers that is just as good, which one would I as a consumer buy? I thought that I would buy the Founding Fathers ketchup and try it once. If it didn't taste like the Heinz ketchup I'd never buy it again. If it was as good or better I would continue to buy it." But Knutsen is realistic. "I'm not out to capture 50 percent of the AB-Inbev market share. If I can raise a lot of money to help the troops and their families, then mission accomplished."

Founding Fathers is currently available only in Minnesota and North Dakota, but Knutsen expects to roll out in seven more states by mid-year. There will be a local component to the giving in each state. Nationally, profits will be donated to the [Armed Forces Relief Trust](#). A second recipient in each state will have local ties. Knutsen is working with an advisory board of military officers to help select the charities. In Minnesota, Founding Fathers has partnered with [Tee It Up for the Troops](#), a charity golf tournament, and [the Minnesota Military Families Foundation](#), an organization that gives financial assistance to the families of deployed soldiers.

Founding Fathers Lager is exactly as described, an amber-colored, American-style lager. Poured into a pilsner glass it's brilliantly clear with a fluffy, white head. Modest caramel malt flavors underlie light, spicy hops. Bitterness is moderate, but I found it higher than many beers of the style. Hardcore beer-nerds may find it a bit boring, but if you are a fan of Grain Belt Nordeast then it might be right up your alley.

Knutsen plans to release Founding Fathers Premium and Light in the coming months.

Cheers,
Michael Agnew
Certified Cicerone
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