

Clifford Brewing Company

In less than a decade, Clifford Brewing Company and its owner, Brad Clifford, went from brewing beer on a stovetop in a downtown Toronto condominium to winning the 2019 Canadian Brewery of the Year award.

Headquarters	398 Nash Rd., Unit 1, Hamilton, ON, L8H 7P5
Year Established	2013
NAICS	312120 - Breweries
Employees	8
Major Expansions	2017
Exports	N/A
Parent Company	N/A
Other Locations	-

Most of Ontario's more than 300 craft breweries only dream of winning such a prestigious award. Clifford Brewing won the award less than two years after it established its bricks and mortar brewery on Nash Road North in east Hamilton. Clifford Brewing joins Toronto's Great Lakes Brewery and Collingwood's Side Launch Brewing as the only Ontario breweries to have won this award. The journey to the Canadian Brewing Awards, however, began several years before the brewery opened.

A native of Ingersoll and (originally) a financial communications specialist, Brad was introduced to craft beer while living in downtown Toronto. More specifically, he credits Front Street institution C'est What?, which unabashedly bills itself as 'the granddaddy of craft beer bars', as a catalyst for his passion for craft beer. Inspired by the underground appeal of Toronto's craft brewing scene in the 2000s, Brad purchased homebrewing equipment and began brewing beer in his condominium at Richmond and Sherbourne sometime around 2009.

His first brew admittedly did not turn out as well as he hoped. Brad persisted, however, joining the Canadian Amateur Brewers Association (CABA), which at the time featured the future brewmasters of a number of soon-to-be-established Ontario craft breweries. He won the CABA's Great Canadian Homebrew Competition in 2011, and then again in 2012. The prize: an opportunity to design and brew a beer in collaboration with Ontario craft brewing industry icon Beau's All Natural Brewing Company. These beers—a German pilsner and a double IPA—were Clifford's first foray into commercial brewing and were featured on tap at Toronto's C'est What, The Rhino, and Bar Volo, Ottawa's Dominion Tavern, and several other craft-focused establishments in Ontario. Their willingness to feature such beers is testament to the important

role these establishments played in supporting Ontario's burgeoning craft beer industry.

These awards earned Brad recognition among craft beer enthusiasts, and ultimately an invitation to establish a nano-brewery at Get Well in Toronto's rapidly-evolving Trinity-Bellwoods neighborhood. This would be the first place where the public could drink his namesake and award-winning porter. An arcade and pinball-themed bar, Get Well also serves as the inspiration for Clifford's Pinball Wizard IPA, one of the brewery's flagship beers. It was here that Brad learned how to source and install brewery equipment. These skills proved extremely valuable when it came time to open his own brewery in 2017.

Brad also credits friend and Mill Street Brewery co-founder Mike Duggan for teaching him about brewing and the intricacies of producing and selling beer in Ontario. A neighbour of the former Duggan's Brewery on Victoria Street in Toronto, Brad shadowed Mike in the brewery, helping with all the glamorous and not-so-glamorous tasks associated with craft brewing. This was Brad's first exposure to a commercial brewery, albeit on a small scale. Mike also helped Brad with his nano-brewery at Get Well, where they would experiment with Ontario-grown hops.

Their experiment with Ontario-grown hops led to a full-fledged collaboration in 2013, where Brad and Mike brewed the first beer in recent memory that used 100% Ontario ingredients. While such beers are more common in Ontario brewery taprooms today, sourcing the appropriate hops was much harder to do ten years ago. Brad and Mike had to procure hops from several farmers who were growing them primarily as a hobby, and process the hops themselves using a hammer mill. After brewing pilot batches at Get Well, the eventual products—100 Mile Lager and 100 Mile Ale—were produced on contract at Etobicoke's Cool Brewing and sold locally and through the LCBO. This was Brad's first experience brewing on a full-scale production system, as well as with packaging and distribution, working with the LCBO, and using the Clifford Brewing name and logo.

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Building on these experiences, Brad began to brew on contract at Waterloo's Innocente Brewing and had two products—Clifford Porter and Pinball Wizard—listed in the LCBO in 2015. As the popularity of his beer increased among retail and licensee customers, Brad began spending more time in his then-new (and still operating) Nissan delivery van than he was brewing beer or working at his other job in downtown Toronto. As his flagship Clifford Porter began growing in popularity and winning awards, Brad moved to Hamilton and began contemplating a bricks and mortar brewery.

The experience that Brad gained during his time as an amateur and contract brewer proved instrumental when it came time to build a brewery. The Clifford brand was recognized within the industry and by customers. He had experience working with the LCBO and with licensees across southern Ontario. His frequent collaborations with other craft breweries such as Duggan's, Beau's, Cool, and Innocente had helped him learn about the process and potential pitfalls associated with opening a brewery in Ontario.

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When it came time to open a brewery, Brad enlisted the support of his father, Barc. An Ingersoll-area business owner with an entrepreneurial spirit, Barc's business acumen and financial backing allowed Brad to open a larger and more modern brewery than he would have on his own. The support of Brian Morris at the City of Hamilton's economic development office in locating a suitable site was also instrumental. With more than 10,000 square feet, high ceilings, ample parking, and a good water supply, the Nash Road site identified by Morris has proven to be an ideal location for the growing brewery.

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Receiving the Canadian Brewery of the Year awards is among the highest accolades that any craft brewer can receive. The fact that Clifford Brewing won the award after operating for only two years is exceptional. These awards are part of an annual conference where hundreds of Canadian-owned breweries submit beer to be evaluated by certified judges. Judging is blind and based on specific style guidelines. Judges focus on the merits of the beer and are not aware of who brewed it. The Brewery of the Year is awarded to the brewery with the highest combined weighted score from four entries selected by the brewer. Clifford won based on its East Hamilton Lager, Marigold Belgian Ale, Barrel Aged Porter, and eponymously named porter.

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Clifford Brewing currently has a staff of eight, which is twice as large as when they won brewery of the year. Operating seven days a week, the team that Brad has recruited gets a lot done. His advice: give people space to do their jobs and enough autonomy to be creative, welcome new ideas, and give guidance occasionally and only when necessary. Brad also lets people grow into new roles wherever possible. For example, Clifford's delivery person—who knows the business front-to-back and interfaces with customers regularly—is naturally evolving into a sales role.

As the pandemic recedes, Brad is most excited to return to the trajectory of growth that Clifford Brewing was enjoying following its brewery of the year award in 2019. He is also looking forward to further building the Clifford brand throughout Hamilton, and especially among the city's arts and music communities. Since pandemic-related restrictions have been lifted, the brewery has doubled as a live music venue, often showcasing bands featuring the brewery's staff. Keeping with the family motif, Brad's brother Bryce



installed the sound system in the brewery's event space, books artists, and has even been known to perform with Brad on drums. As the number of live music venues in Hamilton declined during the pandemic, Clifford Brewing has filled a void for local artists. According to Brad, this helps establish organic connections to local music and arts communities.

While they continue to focus on a smaller number of core brands, Brad and his team have released over 30 beers since the brewery opened. The ultimate test for any product is whether the brewery staff enjoys it, and whether customers request that they bring back seasonal brews. Finally, and in addition to being recognized for brewing great beer, growing market share in Hamilton, and expanding the brewery's presence throughout southern Ontario, Brad aspires to be recognized as a leader within Ontario's craft brewing community. He recently took a major step towards this latter goal, when he was elected to the Ontario Craft Brewers board of directors in June 2022.