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## Birds of a feather

By Willie Sampson  
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The guys at The 3 Ravens Brewing Company have me foxed. Either they're a bunch of engineers who operate a micro-brewery on the side, or they're a group of micro-brewers who moonlight as engineers by day. Take your pick, but these two enterprises exist side-by-side in the same Thornbury building.

Walk in the front door and you're in the offices of the Zektin Group, which tackles multimillion-dollar engineering projects, while out the back is a tiny brewery that churns out 250-litre batches of "real ale". The common ground is the Pleasure Palace, a funky, retro bar below the offices where the engineers/micro-brewers hang out after work. Think furry purple wall hangings, a fridge stocked with imported beers and five different varieties of absinthe and you get the picture. When Brew visited late one afternoon, Raven Blond was on tap, which was enough to encourage a gaggle of them to down tools immediately and breast the bar.

"A happy worker is a good worker," says Zeke Yarak (a director of both the Zektin Group and 3 Ravens Brewing Company), explaining the rationale behind the workplace bar. "Our pipe dream was always to own a bar like Sam in *<i>Cheers</i>."*

"We've [3 Ravens] got five directors, a brewer and about 20 'quality-control testers' upstairs," he says, as we blow the suds off a pint of cloudy, amber-gold beer. As Yarak explains it, the micro-brewery evolved after the Brandon Hotel in North Carlton changed hands last year and he could no longer get a pint of his favourite, hand-pumped real ale.

"Real ale is a totally different taste," he says. And the taste had him well and truly hooked. "When we started brewing we thought: 'If we can't sell it, we'll drink it'."

A few months on and they're both drinking and selling their beer, with the Sherlock Holmes pub recently signing up as their first pub outlet.

Ben Pattison, the head brewer for 3 Ravens, was suitably chuffed when Black Raven snared a bronze medal at this year's Australian International Beer Awards. "We were up against guys who've been brewing for ages and we'd only been going a couple of months," says Pattison, who was encouraged by the feedback at the brewing expo which followed the awards. "People came up to us and said it was the best beer they'd ever tried."

A long-time home-brewer, Pattison started brewing 50-litre trial batches. "There was quite a lot of trial and error in the early brews," he says. Because real ale undergoes a secondary fermentation in the cask, the right level of carbonation is critical. Pattison also says fruity flavours emerge during the cask-conditioning period. "Different flavours come and go at different stages," he says.

The brewery will eventually have to embrace production on a larger scale, Pattison says. "We know we've got to scale up to make money," he says.

Labels are being designed and there are plan to release the ales in bottles before Christmas. The range of 3 Ravens beers will include Blond, Dark, Black, Bronze and White.

The 3 Ravens range has found a comfortable niche at the Sherlock Holmes, where publican Paul Harris, a former Londoner, understands the challenges of conditioning and serving real ale. The casks rest on a specially built cradle to the side of the bar and are served through a pair of traditional beer engines.

Harris is delighted with the response so far. "People ring up to make sure we've got Ravens on," he said.

*Inquiries: The 3 Ravens Brewing Company, 1 Theobald Street, Thornbury, phone 9495 1666. On tap: Sherlock Holmes, Collins Street, city.*

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/10/21/1066631393122.html>*