

BUILDING A BREWERY

Size and visibility of new Chilliwack facility have already made it a local landmark

GLENDALUYMES

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This valve block for the finished product is used to route beer into the bright beer tanks (in the background) and then finally to be packaged.
PHOTOS: RICHARD LAM/PNG



Conveyor belts dominate the distribution section of the new Molson Coors brewery in Chilliwack, a huge 400,000-square-foot facility to open early next summer.

You might expect hyperbole in a story about the Molson Coors Canada brewery under construction in Chilliwack.

After all, beer has been known to inspire poetry, while odes to ale remain a popular topic in country music.

But a 400,000-square-foot building requires no embellishment to be extraordinary.

The \$200-million Molson Coors brewery, on a 14.5-hectare parcel beside the Trans-Canada Highway, will be the company's largest brewery in Western Canada.

Its size and visibility have made it a local landmark already, as other buildings, including a Best Buy warehouse directly across the highway, look small in comparison.

About seven months ahead of its

anticipated opening early next summer, the building recently was closed in with steel panels. The cool, grey interior hums with generators. Bursts of welding sparks catch the eye.

About 100 brew tanks of varying sizes are in place across the space, including the massive fermentation tanks with steel legs buried deep in a concrete slab more than a metre thick. A crackfree concrete floor gleams like a sheet of ice. It's impossible to track a single pipe through the labyrinth on the ceiling above.

The technical work of connecting the piping and electricity is underway.

"It is an amazing operation," Chilliwack Mayor Ken Popove said. The newly-elected civic leader recently toured the brewery. "There's no down side to this for our city."

Construction has generated about 1,000 jobs. The brewery eventually will be staffed by about 100 employees. The company says it is still determining how many of those people will come from the soon-to-close Vancouver brewery and how many more positions will need to be filled. Job postings have already started to appear online.

The construction stats are impressive, too. About 1,900 tonnes of steel and 13,000 cubic metres of concrete will be used in the brewery, according to Molson Coors. (In comparison, 13,000 tonnes of structural steel and 157,000 cubic metres of concrete were used in the Port Mann Bridge.)

In May, 50 stainless steel brew tanks arrived at the New Westminster port from China. For the better part of a month, the largest tanks, some of them 5.5 metres in diameter and 18 metres tall, were loaded onto barges and moved up river before being transported by truck across Chilliwack in the middle of the night.

"There was significant complexity to the tank process," said Matt Hook, chief supply chain officer.

Building a brewery isn't an everyday occurrence, even for a large company like Molson Coors Canada. Its last big build was in Moncton in 2007, and the next one will likely be Montreal in 2021.



This drone photo, taken in June during construction, gives a bird's-eye view of the brewery in Chilliwack.



Drone image of the new Molson Coors brewery in Chilliwack taken on November 30, 2018. (Molson Coors/Matthew Hawkins). Richard Lam / PNG



This drone photo, taken in June during construction, gives a bird's-eye view of the brewery in Chilliwack.

The company's latest project began in earnest in November 2015 when Molson Coors sold its landmark Vancouver brewery to developer Concord Pacific for a reported \$185 million.

The company wanted a new facility west of the Rockies, close to its Port Coquitlam distribution centre and the port of Metro Vancouver, said Hook. But finding a large enough site inside Metro was never going to be easy.

After looking at 30 to 35 different property options, only a handful had the right water, soil and utility infrastructure, said Hook. In August 2016, the company announced Chilliwack as the brewery's new B.C. home.

It was fitting, in a way. In the 1940s, Chilliwack was the largest hop-growing region in the British Commonwealth until lower United States production costs drove operations south.

Hop farming is experiencing a resurgence in B.C., driven largely by the craft beer industry.

Earlier this month, Molson Coors announced it would be buying local hops for some of its brews, naming two Chilliwack farms and an Abbotsford farm.

To start, the new brewery will produce about the same volume of beer as the Vancouver site — exactly how much is a trade secret, said Hook. It will primarily serve the western Canadian market, brewing, packing and distributing Molson Canadian, Coors Light,

Rickards and Granville Island Brewing products as well as cider in cans, bottles and kegs. Production can be scaled up or down depending on market demand.

Unlike the Vancouver brewery, which rises several stories high, the Chilliwack brewery is on one level, increasing its efficiency. Water and grains enter the building on one side before being pumped through a series of tanks. The mash steeps in a large kettle before hops and yeast are added farther along the line before reaching the giant fermentation tanks. After filtration, the final "bright beer" is bottled, pasteurized and packaged before leaving the building on a pallet.

Making beer requires large quantities of water, Hook said. It often takes five or six litres of water to produce one litre of beer. Molson Coors is aiming for a 3:1 water-to-beer ratio.

Despite its impressive scale, the brewery will still be small by international standards. The world's largest single-site brewery, the Coors brewery in Golden, Colo., makes 12 to 14 times more beer than the new Chilliwack brewery.

But in Canada, the new brewery can hold its own. It's a medium-sized facility compared to Montreal and Toronto, but it will supply the western Canadian market, with B.C.'s notable affinity for cans over bottles.

"For all of us, this is a special occasion," Hook said. "Many people don't get a chance to be part of something like this in their career. Next year is going to be a very, very important year for us."

When the first can of beer slides smoothly off the assembly line in early summer, it could be worth a poem — or at least a country song.



Twenty-two brewing tanks were barged up the Fraser River to Chilliwack in May. (Molson Coors/Matthew Hawkins Richard Lam / PNG)