

HOW THE WEST WAS WON

BE With her father's cash, Petra Wetzel set up a bold Bavarian brewing company in Glasgow that hit the buffers. Now she's rebuilding the business with a renewed sense of purpose and vision. Kenny Kemp met her over a pint of St Mungo's

Dad is special. Dad as an active investor in his daughter's brewery, that's a special brew. But Dad coming to the rescue when the brewing venture collapses, that's liquid gold. Glasgow belongs to Petra Wetzel. She is one of those wonderful hybrid Glaswegian; she loves the Glasgow Boys, the spires of Gilmorehill, the honest denizens of Dennistoun, the glasshouses of the Peoples' Palace, her semi in Bearsden and the Glasgow patter. But she was born in Bavaria and her mentor and greatest business supporter – her father Herbert, now 65 – still lives in Germany. Petra Wetzel, 36, has created a corner of Bavaria in the unlikely setting of the old Templeton's Carpet factory beside Glasgow Green. Her wunderbar WEST brewery, with its expansive, kids and dog-friendly eaterie, makes unique beer and she and her team have aspirations to build WEST as a major drinks brand in the UK.

"I didn't drink a pint of beer before I started WEST," she says, sipping a glass of St Mungo. "Not one. I had tried, but I'd never had a pint of lager."

WEST's signature beer, a Munich-style lager brewed with Bavarian Bamberg malt, Perle & Tettnang hops, is named after Glasgow's patron saint. Its brothers, WEST Hefeweizen, and WEST Munich Red, are carbon copies of the strict German method of brewing, and all



made in Wetzel's brewery. The only ingredients allowed by law are water, malted barley, yeast and hops with the flavour created by the brewing process. If a word sums up what she is trying to do it is the German adjective "echt", which is not a place in Aberdeenshire. Echt means genuine, pure and authentic. WEST is trying to achieve these qualities with its beer. But, after a false start when WEST hit the buffers, this effervescent blonde German has regrouped, brought in some heavyweight

help, and sees immense opportunity for her brewing brand.

She is now in advanced discussions to build a new £6.6m production brewery in Glasgow, creating more than 20 new jobs at Maryhill, where there will be a Dutch canal barge as café and restaurant and a visitors' centre. And, on the sidelines, Scotland's major brewers are watching with heightened interest how Wetzel and her team manage that difficult phase of growth from a micro-brewery to an established beer brand selling across the on-trade and off-trade. There is certainly a buzz about WEST.

Yet thirtysomething Petra isn't a natural bevy-merchant; she doesn't have a degree in microbiology or even a masters in brand marketing. Born in Erlangen, she went to school in Ebermannstadt, a beautiful rural Bavarian town in the forest lands in Upper Franconia. The nearest city is Nuremberg, twinned with Glasgow.

At 12, Petra Wetzel came to Balfour on a school exchange and "absolutely fell in love with Scotland." She remembers the bagpiper at Stirling Castle when the coach arrived and she was introduced to her host family, the McRaes from Kippen, in Stirlingshire. Their daughter, Eilidh "was like a sister to me and we stayed in touch for all those years."

"I come from Franconia which is the >>



1994 to study politics, history of art and management at Glasgow University. She then won a scholarship to a French business school where she polished her obvious linguistic talents. But the lure of Glasgow was too much and she returned to the city in 1998, completing her degree, and gaining a first. Her dad Herbert and mum Brigitte flew over to visit their successful daughter.

"My dad and I were sitting in the Ubiquitous Chip in the West End and he asked what the Glasgow lager was like," she says. "I said, 'It's Tennents.'" He ordered a half-pint and it was duly delivered. He took one sip and cringed. "It's one of these things," she says. "You don't want to slag another brewery, but really the reason WEST exists is because of that moment."

Not everyone agrees with this assessment of Scotland's most popular lager – which has recently taken to marketing itself as originally from Bavaria – but Herbert Wetzel obviously has a particular Bavarian palate.

"Is this the only stuff they produce in this country?" he asked. At the time it was. While brewing giants S&N, now Heineken UK, and InBev manufactured their mass market products, there were no other distinctive "Bavarian-style" lager breweries in Scotland. This was a market opportunity.

In her final year at university, Wetzel met Gordon, her future husband; they got married and bought a house in Bearsden. She began working for the Glasgow Tourist Board, now the Glasgow City Marketing Board. She was responsible for marketing conferences alongside Eddie Friel and the current chief executive Scott Taylor.

"This was my first ever job," she says. "The reason I think I was good at the job was that I wasn't from Glasgow. I had fallen in love with Glasgow and was a real fan of the city. I could have made my home anywhere in the world, but I picked Glasgow. I became an 'ambassador' for Scotland everywhere I went to the trade fairs across Europe."

Wetzel then met Michael Dean, a partner at Maclay Murray & Spens, the law firm, through the German-British Chamber of Commerce, who encouraged her to become a lawyer. As a

pre-diploma trainee, she studied law with the Law Society of Scotland from January 2001. She says: "I didn't even have a law degree. I was a trainee in the competition law department and a major client was raided the day I started. They had companies in France and Germany and, because I was fluent in all these languages, I was useful."

She remained with the law firm for five years. But her father's encouragement to create a Bavarian beerhall in Glasgow was too tempting. With investment from her father, she and her husband looked for a suitable site, invited a German brewery company to help them build the brewhouse, and they set up West Brewing Company.

"My dad's an entrepreneur," she says, "and I basically sold the idea to my dad. My dad funded my (now) ex-husband and his friend through brewing school for three months." Wetzel would rather airbrush her former husband out of the story at this stage. Suffice to say that he took on responsibility for the brewery project. It ran into acute trouble. He departed, and Herbert Wetzel returned to help resuscitate the brewing dream, with his daughter at the helm. Before then, in November 2004, she appeared on the very first episode of Dragons' Den, when she was six weeks' pregnant – although she didn't realise she was expecting a baby and put her queasiness down to nerves. The dragons didn't give them the money but Wetzel wasn't too bothered.

"I wouldn't have taken any money from any of them," she says. "In my opinion, they didn't have the least interest in supporting an up-coming business. All they were interested in was their own PR. In the end I'm really happy that we didn't divest because we didn't need the money."

"We wanted a mentor, someone who could catapult the business on to the next level." Her son Noah was born in July 2005, with the brewery opening in March 2006, and Wetzel went back to work part-time with the law firm, while her husband was in charge of day-to-day business.

In October 2006, the couple separated and her estranged husband was running the business completely independently while she concentrated on being Noah's mum. In late

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northern part of Bavaria and it has the highest density of breweries in the world," she says. "Every little village, no matter how small, has a brewery," she explains, saying the taste comes from "lagering" or laying down the beer in wooden kegs for three weeks before drinking. "I think that the Bavarian and Scottish accents are very familiar. And Germans love all things Scottish. There are 50,000 German-born people living in Scotland, so out of a population of around five million, that's a lot of people." Encouraged by her penpal, Wetzel arrived in



Beer today: WEST's beers are produced in accordance with the Reinheitsgebot, the strict German brewing purity law

2007, things went awry and an awful picture began to unfold. Wetzel was shocked by what was happening.

"My dad ran a business and he knew about profit and loss and he hadn't been given proper information," she says. "Now, rightly so, he wanted to know what was going on. He had invested a lot and he wanted to know what was happening."

For Wetzel, this was a moment of truth. "I wanted to do my dad justice. I started to find out what was actually happening and if we owed money. We owed a lot."

The situation was so bad that the West Brewing Company ended up in administration. "There was no way this was going to fly," she recalls. But she was determined; she stepped back into the fray with the help of Kenny Craig, Tenon's head of corporate recovery. "I have to say that without Kenny, I would not have done this," she says. "He was an absolute superstar. He used to say to me, 'You just need to take stock and see where you stand.'"

Craig challenged Wetzel by asking her if she wanted to try this again. "He told me it had failed miserably and did I want to put more money into it," she says. She visited her father for a business heart-to-heart. Despite all the angst and stress, Dad still wanted to help his daughter. He would let her

buy the business back from the administrators. In February 2008, her lawyer, Adrian Bell of Morton Fraser, phoned up and told her she was now able to take back the assets of West Brewing Company.

"Who is actually buying it?" he asked. "What's it called?" By now, the most important male in Wetzel's life was her son.

"The light of my life is Noah," she says. "We produce beer, so it became Noah Beers Limited. This is the company, not the brand." The business was bought back as a going concern with all the brewing equipment in place, now Wetzel would be a full-time managing director devoting herself to making it work.

She says: "I wouldn't have done it if I had to close the front door for one day." What she now needed was insider experience to help her take the business forward. From brewing once a week, this is now a five-days-a-week operation, making between 200,000 and 400,000 litres a year and bottling at Williams Bros Brewing Company in Alloa. "I had to go back to basics," she says. "The reason the brewery started was that my father and I had friends in Germany in the brewing industry. Uwe Kraus, the brewmaster from Mahr brewery, came back to set things on course again."

What was apparent was that the brewhouse was underfinanced.

"We spent 12 months improving the place and fixing things to increase our output significantly," she says. "My dad was a superhero, I wanted to prove a point here. He put his faith in the venture and somebody else failed him; I wanted to prove that this was still a good idea. This time, he put his trust in me." The WEST vision required strategic business people on board. Petra Wetzel was joined by consultant Hilary Jones who worked with former S&N man Stephen Glancey – now head of operations with C&C Group, owners of Magners cider and the aforementioned Tennents Lager. She was technical director and head of quality operations for S&N before it was sold to Heineken. She is a Fellow of the Institute of Brewing and Distilling and now a mentor and investor.

"I met her because she was the President of the European Brewery Convention," says Wetzel. "She came on a site visit because the EBC convention is being hosted in Glasgow in May 2011, which is fantastic for the city." Hilary Jones wanted to become involved with WEST, saying it was one of the most exciting new things in UK brewing. She bought a minority stake in Noah Beers, with Petra Wetzel and her father retaining 85%. "It's one of the best things we've done: >>



Teutonic spirit: Through sheer determination, Petra Wetzel has managed to introduce German brewing expertise to the Scottish palate

bringing another woman on board who has real knowledge of the international beer industry," says Wetzel. "She is passionate about WEST beers."

Jones is now responsible for logistics and brewing, mentoring the half-German, half-Scottish brewing team in Glasgow. On the finance side is Gillian Hastings, a consultant to numerous Scottish businesses and formerly an Ernst & Young partner; Richard McLelland, the recently arrived sales director who came via BrewDog and Red Bull, and Gemma Leisegang, formerly of Waverley TBS working on trade sales for the UK. WEST's beerhall and restaurant, leased from Credential Holdings, is looked after by Liam Bedwell, and under his management, events, conferences and

weddings, have thrived. Although her team has affectionately dubbed her The Kaiser, she acknowledges she couldn't have turned around the business – and now making profits – without the help of her WEST family. Increasingly, WEST beer is brewed for off-site customers, starting with the award-winning Firebird café and restaurant in Glasgow, and since then many others have followed suit. WEST is the house lager in Peter Taylor's fantastic six-star Blythswood Hotel, a tremendous accolade.

"The hotel doesn't have any other beer on draught, so they are big fans of what we do," says Wetzel. Waitrose is also selling WEST's St Mungo lager beer in more than 200 stores, but it will take time to win significant market

share from the big boys who have marketing budgets ten times WEST's £1m turnover. Wetzel speaks almost daily to her dad on the phone; on Sunday morning they have a family catch-up, and he remains an enthusiast bubbling with ideas.

"He's the best quality control person you can have," she says. "He loves his lager. When he comes over he sits at the bar and talks about how the brewing is going. If he likes it, it gets a tick, if he doesn't then it doesn't. In essence, Herbert Wetzel is still at the heart of the business. And Petra Wetzel, now with nearly 40 staff on board, wants to build her premium lager brand based in Bridgeton. The year 2011 will be massive for her – and for Noah Beers. ■

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