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Chuck Silva, left, his wife, Mary Jo, and Pour House owner Shawn Copen share a toast.

Setting the stage for a 'rock star' in the brewing world

Chuck Silva, born in San Luis Obispo, helped forge the modern craft beer revolution at Green Flash Brewing Co. in San Diego

His goal for Silva Brewing, based in Paso Robles, is to produce good, fresh beer and some hand-bottled specialty beers in elegant cork-and-cage packaging

With a brewing capacity of about 1,000 barrels a year, Silva is angling to get taps in a few local establishments

BY SALLY BUFFALO
Special to The Tribune

It may have been San Diego where Chuck Silva helped forge the modern craft beer revolution as brewmaster at Green Flash Brewing Co., but when he decided to start his own brewery, he chose Paso Robles.

For Silva, the reasons are many. He was born in San Luis Obispo, where his mother still lives, and he lived around the county for much of his childhood. It's quieter than San Diego, with less traffic. And he liked the idea of being in wine country, with access to barrels and opportunities for unique collaborations.

"I'm setting roots here," he said. "I'd like to retire here."

For beer drinkers, it's nothing short of a coup. "It's huge," said Shawn Copen, owner of the Pour House in Paso Robles, a taproom specializing in craft beers. "He's a rock star of the brewing world, among the best in the industry."

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Chuck Silva is opening a small brewery behind The Pour House in Paso Robles.

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Silva is widely credited with making Green Flash the iconic brewery it is today as well as driving the movement toward hoppy, flavorful craft beers that have been stealing market share from the mass producers for the past five years.

Over the span of 11 years, Silva helped Green Flash grow from a struggling operation into the 48th largest craft brewery in the country, seeing the company through a few expansions, the addition of a separate facility for rare and barrel-aged brews, and the planning of a new

brewery in Virginia slated to open this year.

He innovated new, flavor-forward beer creations that have racked up awards and medals, including a gold medal at the Great American Beer Festival just last fall for Green Flash's Le Freak, a boundary-pushing hybrid of Belgian-style trippel and American imperial IPA.

STRIKING OUT ON HIS OWN

While he's proud of his role in changing beer culture — San Diego, now at the forefront of craft brewing, was “a bit of a Coors Light town,” Silva says — his plans for Silva Brewing are more modest.

“I'm not trying to build a brand and just grow, grow, grow,” he said. “I want

to do projects that are more sustainable and very local.”

The goal is to produce accessible, good, fresh beer along with some hand-bottled specialty beers in elegant cork-and-cage packaging, though canning might be a possibility down the road.

He's secured space on Pine Street behind The Pour House to house a 10-barrel brew system, a few 20-barrel fermentation tanks and a small tasting bar with a growler-fill station, a refrigerated case for the bottles and 10 taps offering fresh brews.

With a brewing capacity of about 1,000 barrels a year, he's also angling to

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Bartender Anthony Young pours a beer at The Pour House in Paso Robles.

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get taps in a few local establishments, something Copen eagerly signed up for. The Pour House will offer about a half-dozen Silva taps, highlighted with prominent signage.

"We'll be like his taproom, though we'll still carry all the other beers," Copen said. The timing is fortuitous, as The Pour House is working on an expansion that will double its capacity and add a separate room for music. "He's going to be a huge draw."

When Silva Brewing opens in late summer or early fall, he'll join a burgeoning craft beer scene in the county. Firestone Walker Brewing Co., founded 20 years ago, continues to grow in size and reputation, now the 22nd largest in the county and 16th among craft breweries.

More recent entrants BarrelHouse Brewing Co. and Tap It Brewing have both seen fast growth, and smaller micro-breweries have popped up in cities around the county.

But rather than view Silva as competition, some local brewers are excited about the boost to the local industry.

"He'll be a nice addition to the land-

scape here," said Matt Brynildson, Firestone's brewmaster. "It's like the wine industry. This area can support lots of good local producers."

In fact, Brynildson has already invited Silva to collaborate on a special beer using an old Saxum Vineyards barrel.

"It'll be a fusion project, with the winemaker, a wood barrel and us brewers," said Brynildson, who hopes to have the brew ready in time for Silva's opening. "I thought it would be a nice welcome to the neighborhood."

VISIONS OF A FARM BREWERY

The small downtown spot wasn't what Silva originally had in mind when he moved here in December after leaving Green Flash a couple months before.

Married in May, Silva and his wife, Mary Jo, envisioned a farm brewery somewhere out in Paso wine country, a place where he could grow rhubarb and fruits to use in his brews, maybe start a hobby vineyard, forge partnerships with wineries and offer an alternative stop on the wine trail.

"I want to have the chickens and do some sustainable stuff with using the spent grain for compost and worm castings and all that," he said. "That's the dream."

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Brewer Chuck Silva

But he learned that brewery operations aren't allowed under the current agriculture zoning. He went to the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors in the fall and is now pursuing a change to the regulations, but it's unlikely to happen for a while, so that vision is on hold for now.

Even the Pine Street spot will require a lot of work. There are architectural and engineering plans for the 1,265-square-foot space to submit to the city, applications to the Alcohol Trade and Tax Bureau and Alcoholic Beverage Control to be filed, and ordering and installing the brewing equipment, which alone can take about six months.

Silva expects to spend about \$300,000 on equipment and tenant improvements to the space, where he has a five-year lease with options for two additional terms.

When it's finished, he says, the space will offer an industrial feel with a view of the tanks, warmed up by local materials such as walnut wood, and plenty of the creative brews Silva is known for.

Barrel-aging, sour beers, wild ales, brewing with grapes, apples, unusual fruits, exploring things no one else is doing — nothing is off limits for Silva.

"The sky is the limit," he said. "Craft beer drinkers are adventurous. They want to try new flavors."

But mostly, he said, "I'm just going to make what I like, which is a little bit of everything."