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US brewery is inspired by Chornobyl catastrophe

By Askold Krushelnycky. Published April 26. Updated April 26 at 10:35 am



From left, Vasyl and Cindy Lenchuk with assistants Alexandere Pitre and Christine Triffari stand behind the Shrewd Fox tap room bar on April 7 in Glen Spey, New York.

Photo by Askold Krushelnycky

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Glen Spey, N.Y.— American-Ukrainian radiation expert Vasyl Lenchuk's idea for opening his own brewery came together while he was working around the ruined reactor at the Chornobyl nuclear power station.

Lenchuk, 55, was born in the state of New Jersey to Ukrainian refugee parents who arrived in the U.S. in 1947.

Like many other children of Ukrainian immigrants, Lenchuk grew up to be a patriotic American but also steeped in the culture and history of the land of his parents. He speaks Ukrainian, attended Ukrainian Saturday schools and took part in cultural activities like traditional choirs and dance groups.

Lenchuk, who joined the U. S. Navy in 1984, was still at college studying the health implications of nuclear, biological, and chemical exposure when, in 1992, he got his first opportunity to visit the devastated Chornobyl power station as a volunteer on a medical team.

One of Chornobyl's four reactors had exploded in April 1986, causing the world's worst nuclear accident and sending radioactive pollution spewing into the atmosphere. A radiation cloud swept over large swathes of Ukraine, including the capital, Kyiv, and Belarus, and reached areas of western Europe, Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland.

The then Soviet government at first denied anything had happened, thus exposing millions of unwitting men, women and children to dangerous levels of radiation. The exact death toll will probably never be known but many believe it is in the thousands.

Lenchuk spent several months with an American medical team studying and providing assistance to victims of the nuclear catastrophe — particularly children vulnerable to thyroid cancer.

Back in the U.S. he continued his studies, obtaining a Master's degree as an expert on the health consequences of nuclear, biological and chemical exposure serving in the Navy as a radiation safety officer.

In 1997 he traveled again to Chornobyl, this time working for Bechtel, a company being paid by the U.S. and other Western countries to secure the nuclear plant's ruined reactor and the rapidly-deteriorating temporary shelter, dubbed "the sarcophagus" that had been erected over it soon after the disaster.

Mapping radiation

Lenchuk mapped out the areas affected by radiation and their levels of contamination to minimize radiation exposure for people working on the construction of a new

structure to enclose the destroyed nuclear reactor and “sarcophagus” and contain the tons of radioactive debris lying around it.

He lived until 2000 with his future wife, Cindy, in Slavutych, the town housing workers looking after the plant’s three functioning reactors and wrecked fourth unit.

He also traveled to other parts of Ukraine to assess radiation concerns as the American Department of Defense took part in dismantling the silos where Soviet-era nuclear missiles were stored.

The American Embassy regularly organized breaks away from the irradiated zones for U.S. personnel, and these led to Lenchuk and Cindy becoming familiar with Ukrainian beer.

One of the places they visited several times was Chernihiv, home to one of Ukraine’s largest breweries. Lenchuk was surprised at how good the beer was. Then another break took him to Zhytomyr and a countryside surrounded by hops — a key component of beer.

“We stopped at a little restaurant where the owner made his own beer. I asked for a taste and it was delicious. I was hooked on Ukrainian beers,” Lenchuk said. The idea started to ferment of eventually brewing beer as a future

business. However, it took more years working as a radiation expert before he and Cindy could advance those plans.

Lenchuk's work took him to many unusual places, including Russia's arctic areas, where the Soviets carried out nuclear tests, and to the deserts in the U.S. state of New Mexico, where America built its first atomic weapon in 1945.

Since 2010, he has worked as a private consultant advising American authorities such as the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the New York City Fire Department and various law-enforcement agencies on how to deal with nuclear, biological and chemical accidents or terrorist attacks.

That allowed time for the Lenchuks to finally realize their plans to start their own brewery.



The Ukrainian-American Shrewd Fox Brewery in Glen Spey, New York produces 12 varieties of craft beer and two ciders. (Courtesy)

Crafty fox, craft beers

In 2014, the Lenchuks bought industrial-grade brewing equipment which they set up in the town of Eldred in New York. They named their enterprise the Shrewd Fox Brewery — derived from a fox called “Lys Mykyta” (Mykyta the Fox), the hero of a children’s story penned by Ukrainian poet and author Ivan Franko.

Mykyta is described as “khytryi” — a Ukrainian word sometimes translated as cunning or sly. “To me that implied an underhand quality to Lys Mykyta, whereas

I always thought of him as a smart, playful character like Bugs Bunny,” Lenchuk said. “Mykyta isn’t bad — he’s a shrewd fox.”

The brewery produces 12 varieties of craft beer and two ciders. This year Lenchuk expects to brew 200 barrels each containing 31 gallons — a total of around 23,400 liters. Each beer and cider has a distinct, full flavor and names to match, such as Kutya Osela Winter Farmhouse Ale, using buckwheat and honey, Baba Yaga Harbooz Pumpkin Ale and Kozak Porter.

The Eldred location also houses a bar which began serving customers in 2015. Eldred was chosen because it’s just a few kilometers away from the little town of Glen Spey, nestled in the picturesque Catskill Mountains scenery, where decades ago Ukrainian-Americans, including Vasyl Lenchuk’s parents in 1975, started building weekend homes for breaks away from the bustle of places like the cities where they worked, mostly in the states of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Gradually, more Ukrainian-Americans moved in and started spending the entire summer there. They built a Ukrainian Orthodox and a Greek Catholic church and a summer camp for their children. As the years passed, holiday homes turned into primary homes and facilities for retired people.

The whole area now has a strong Ukrainian flavor. Blue-and-yellow flags abound, there is a monument to Ukrainian World War II freedom fighters and streets are named after Ukrainian historical figures. Annual cultural events and summer camps draw thousands of visitors of Ukrainian descent.

When a lease on a suitable building in Glen Spey became available last year, the Lenchuks snapped it up, re-investing the profits from their first “tap room” in Eldred into the far larger new facility, which has a restaurant and can seat around 100 people.

Its splendid wood-paneled interior and imposing bar began their life in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the 1920s, when America outlawed alcohol during the years called the Prohibition Era.

Illicit, secret bars called “speak-easies” sprang up to slake thirsts and, after Prohibition ended in 1933, someone bought and transported the hidden architectural gem to Glen Spey.

“In our business model, the enterprise is primarily a brewery rather than a bar,” Lenchuk said.

The plan is that customers will buy a third of the brewery products for home consumption, another third will be sold

to other bars, restaurants, wholesalers or alcohol retail outlets and only one third will be drunk “in-house.”

“We make craft beers sourced from local ingredients, grown to avoid using chemicals, additives and preservatives and with a view to sustainability,” Lenchuk said. “We use pure Catskills water from wells and weave in a Ukrainian twist. All the spent products from the brewing process go to farms for feeding livestock. None of the waste goes into landfills.”

He said large breweries use huge industrialized farms providing little employment: “They bury the little guy (small business). By contrast our model preserves small local farms and puts money back into the local economy.”

The tap rooms serve traditional Ukrainian fare like varenyky (stuffed dumplings) and a variety of smoked sausages that make a perfect, cholesterol-boosting accompaniment to the beers and cider.

The Lenchuks care deeply about events playing out in Ukraine, keenly following the war and recent elections. They hope that, along with the Ukrainian food and folksy-themed beers, customers will also imbibe some of Ukraine’s history and culture.

Last autumn, the couple held an “Uktoberfest” — the first they hope of an annual Ukrainian Catskills take on Munich’s famed beer festival — featuring bands and other entertainment.

On April 20, as the thirty-third anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster approached, Lenchuk gave a talk to an audience in the Glen Spey tap-room about the nuclear explosion.

He explained how it not only spurred demands for Ukrainian independence but also caused a chain reaction of imagination leading to the creation of the Shrewd Fox Brewery.