One afternoon in the City of Light, John McDonald decided he’d seen enough art for one day. That morning he’d already enjoyed a trip to one of Paris’ many museums with his wife, an art history major, who had another gallery walk lined up for the afternoon.

McDonald, f’76, came to KU in 1971 to study ceramics and left five years later with a degree in painting and printmaking, snagging a prestigious scholarship on his way out the door that enabled him to travel Central and South America, where he taught school and soaked up the local art and culture. But he’d always been more interested in making art than in pulling his chin amid roomfuls of the stuff. “A process-oriented guy,” he calls himself, “with more of a builder-doer mentality.” So that fine day in the early ‘80s he opted instead for a stroll down Parisian boulevards. And that’s how John McDonald found himself for the first time in a Belgian beer bar.

“It was a real eye-opener,” he recalls. “I went back almost every day and tried all the different beers. That’s when I first thought, ‘Wow, why can’t we have something like this in the United States?’”

McDonald had grown up in the farm town of Osborne, in north-central Kansas, where Colorado-brewed Coors claimed a huge market-share; at the time of his Paris visit he considered Bass and Heineken edgy beers. In the Belgian bar he tapped into one of Europe’s oldest craft-brewing traditions. He sampled sour beers and beers made from wild yeast strains, each served in a specific glass designed to bring out the best of each unique brew.

His travels in Europe and Latin America changed McDonald’s attitude about beer. He learned of traditional techniques practiced by small breweries.
He discovered the Campaign for Real Ale, a back-to-basics consumer revolt that riled England in the early ‘70s when beer drinkers rebelled against British brewing industry consolidation and rejected mass-produced beer for “live” ales served from wooden casks.

He brought what he learned back to Kansas City (where he then worked as a carpenter) and started homebrewing in his woodshop at 2501 Southwest Blvd., in a warehouse that once was home to his father’s industrial supply business. In 1988, he turned his beermaking hobby into a business, founding Boulevard Brewing at the central-city site. The next year he sold his first keg of Pale Ale to a Mexican restaurant down the street.

Twenty years later, McDonald has transformed Boulevard into the eighth-largest craft brewery in the United States and the largest in the Midwest. Enjoying double-digit growth almost every year, Boulevard now sells seven year-round and five seasonal beers in 21 states, and the company recently rolled out a line of upscale specialty brews called the Smokestack Series.

“They’re what we call a regional craft brewery,” says Paul Gatza, director of the Brewers Association, which promotes small, independent American brewers. “They no longer qualify as a microbrewery; they’ve outgrown that term because their beers are a little more popular than that.” Growth, often the kiss of doom for a business that favors quality over quantity, has not been a problem for Boulevard, according to Gatza. Getting bigger has meant getting better.

“Their success has allowed them to experiment with these high-end, esoteric beer styles in the Smokestack line that are loaded with flavor,” he says. “Not all brewers can do that because they don’t have the resources.”

Though increased sales led the brewery to expand beyond its original site, acquiring storage and bottling facilities around Kansas City and even a vineyard in rural Missouri, the company has kept its headquarters and brewery on the boulevard that gave the brand its name. A $26 million expansion in 2006 and installation of new fermentation tanks this spring have added much-needed capacity; now Boulevard can brew 200,000 barrels of beer annually. (They sold 140,000 barrels in 2009 and hope to sell 148,000 this year.) The Southwest Boulevard site has room to expand to 800,000 barrels if demand follows.

McDonald is betting it will.

“Look at what’s going on in the food world; people are interested in cooking again,” says McDonald, himself a cook, a gardener and a man who likes a good meal, as long as it’s not “too frou-frou.”

“They want food with real taste. They want to buy local. They’re becoming more and more ecologically minded. So I’m real optimistic: People are getting...
I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety.

—William Shakespeare

I'll tell you one thing about me—and I attribute this to going to art school, really—I look at things very closely,” McDonald says. He’s showing a visitor around, pointing out with obvious pride and enthusiasm the improvements and additions Boulevard has made in the past few years. On a blustery, lead-gray winter afternoon, this is a good place to be. The warm, moist air is downright tropical compared with the raw wind outside, and the yeasty, malty smells of mash and wort and grain remind one of baking bread. And beer.

“I think that’s one thing you learn as an artist, how to see,” he continues. “I can go through a brewery and find 100 things I don’t want and a few things I do. I think that’s a lot of a business, picking and choosing what you’re gonna do, how you’re gonna do it, what equipment you’ll buy and where you’ll put it. I’ve seen a lot of breweries that were not very well thought out.”

Like the startup he toured several years ago. Place had the kiss of death on it before the brewers even fired up the first kettle. But McDonald shared some tips; sent the owners a copy of The Practical Brewer, a beer-making bible the over-matched newbies had obviously never consulted; and wished them well.

“The guy doesn’t have a ruthless bone in his body,” says Jeff Krum, Boulevard’s chief financial officer. “He’s always believed the best thing for our business is for our segment, the craft segment, to thrive.”

Krum was among the first people McDonald approached back in the ‘80s with “a crazy idea” to start a brewery.

“John recognized from the beginning that not everybody is going to like our beer. He says often, ‘Not everybody will like our beer, but there’s no reason everybody shouldn’t like us.’ His whole approach to business is based on that idea. Treat everyone with respect and do things the right way.”

In his carpentry days McDonald was known as a cabinetmaker with a passion for exacting work. His brewery, which mixes a craftsman’s predilection for hands-on care and an artist’s eye for detail, bears his imprint. The original brewhouse, where Boulevard made its first beer in a 1930s-era copper kettle from Germany, is still in use. The new wing melds state-of-the-art bottling and brewing machinery with prize-winning architecture in a fetching modernist melange of glass and gleaming stainless steel. Massive oak beams used as accents throughout reflect McDonald’s enduring interest in woodcraft.

The philosophy is simple: Taste is paramount. Embrace labor-saving ideas in areas (like bottling) where efficiency makes sense; use the best of traditional and modern methods (even where more costly and time-consuming) for anything that affects taste. Boulevard uses whole hops to enhance the aromatic qualities of its beers, and also adds a small amount of yeast just before bottling in a secondary fermentation process called bottle conditioning. Like most craft brewers, Boulevard doesn’t use the less-expensive adjunct grains rice and corn that are favored by big brewers. European beer-making traditions combine with American ingenuity and inventiveness. Think funky, not gourmet. Boulevard beers are cosmopolitan, yes. But snooty? Not at all. If anything, McDonald and his fellow craft brewers bring rejuvenating flair and daring to an art as old as the Pharaohs.

“Here’s what’s great about being a brewer today,” he says. “We have German equipment, because they make the best; we have a Belgian brewer, because they make the best beer; and we’re Americans, so we don’t have this thousand-years-long brewing culture—we can do whatever we want.”

A Midwestern can-do mentality is at work, too. When money was tight, McDonald recalls, he salvaged old dairy tanks and fitted them to work in the brewery. Until a few years ago, when computerization complicated the process, it wasn’t uncommon to find him pitching in on a brew or stacking cases on pallets.

“I’m a process-oriented guy,” he says. “That’s what I still like about the brewery. I don’t like finance so much; I don’t love the sales side. I like the physical part and what’s going on with the beer and the improvements we’re making here.”
By surrounding himself with people like Krum, who handles finances, and Bob Sullivan, who handles sales, McDonald has been able to focus on what he loves.

“His passion has never been about being wildly successful or even making money,” Krum says. “He’s a hands-on guy who loves to create things.”

He was a wise man who invented beer.  
—Plato

In an industry almost pathologically obsessed with marketing, Boulevard swims against the tide—at least when compared with the big three beermakers that, according to Beer Marketer’s Insights, an industry trade newsletter, control 84 percent of the U.S. market.

On that topic, McDonald, an otherwise genial sort whom Krum calls “an uniquely humble and self-effacing human,” is not shy about sharing his opinion.

“The big breweries, they’re run by the marketing and business people; they’re no longer run by the brewers,” he says. “One thing we really pride ourselves on is our beers come from the bottom up; they start with the brewers.” Research and development at Boulevard is pretty simple: The brewers sit around a table trying new beers and coming up with ideas.

McDonald lured his master brewer, Steven Pauwels, to Kansas City from Belgium. Pauwels says his boss gives him and his 13-member team free rein to explore and create new flavors. “In the end that’s what we do: We’re not making alcohol, we’re creating flavors,” Pauwels says.

Before the expansion, the brewery strained to meet demand. “We were working so hard to turn out our regular beers that we were not seen to be innovative or exciting,” Krum recalls. Meanwhile, Pauwels says, a second generation of brewers crashed the craft beer party, “younger guys who were very loud and aggressive and making bolder beers than we were making.” In contrast to this youth movement, he says, Boulevard looked like an “old brewery.” When the new brewhouse came online Pauwels and McDonald saw a chance “to make Boulevard sexy again” by experimenting with bolder beers with richer flavors. Thus was born the Smokestack Series.

The specialty beers are sold in 750 ml wine bottles with cork stoppers. The 14 varieties so far have included Two Jokers, a Belgian style witbier spiced with cardamom, lavender and grains of paradise; Long Strange Tripel, a heavily malted brew with three times the alcohol of conventional beers; and Bourbon Barrel Quad, a limited-release whiskey barrel-aged wonder that mixes vanilla, toffee and caramel flavors with sour cherries. In the face of such bawdy complexity, the old debate “Tastes great, less filling” seems a tad inadequate.

Which brings us to beer ads. Boulevard doesn’t command the kind of budget that would allow McDonald to purchase Super Bowl commercials, but he’d surely pass even if he had the jack. Such ads aren’t about beer, in his opinion. And beer—well, that’s what McDonald is most definitely about.

“We’re trying to teach people what beer is all about and what makes it special,” he says, “but I think we’re fighting 50 years of dumbass advertising by big breweries that sold a product strictly on lifestyle. If you drink this beer you will look like this, or have this much fun.”

To accomplish that education goal, Boulevard hosts monthly lunches that pair beer with food prepared by Kansas City restaurants. Brewery tours are among the city’s hottest tickets. And a full-time expert visits pubs and teaches bartenders how to pour a proper glass and maintain draft beer quality—once universal skills that are dying arts, according to McDonald.

“That teaching benefits not just Boulevard but all craft brewers,” says Paul Gatza of the Brewers Association. “In that way they are taking a leadership role for smaller companies. It’s another example of how they use the resources that come from getting bigger.”

You can’t be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of a football team, or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer.  
—Frank Zappa

Bigger, of course is relative. Boulevard execs have a ready statistic to bring folks back to earth: The biggest brewery in America, Anheuser-Busch, which made nearly half of the 209 million barrels of beer sold in the U.S. market in 2009, brews more beer in one day than Boulevard sells in a year.

That doesn’t make any less impressive what Boulevard accomplished in 20 years. Consider the audacity of what McDonald and his partners undertook,
way back in 1989, when they made the leap from brewing a few gallons of beer in a back room to starting a brewery in the home state of America’s biggest beer producer.

At the start of the 20th century, 1,500 breweries were making beer in America—which sounds like a lot until you realize that number represented a sharp decline from a peak of around 4,000 in 1873. According to Gatza, consolidation set in with the advent of refrigeration and rolled on pretty much unabated until 1920, when “Prohibition came along like a freight train and wiped everything out.” Numbers rose to around 800 after repeal, but consolidation—big breweries gobbling up small ones—again led to dwindling numbers and dwindling choices for beer drinkers. By 1980 only 42 companies were making beer in America, mostly the same pale lager.

Just as they had in England, beer enthusiasts in America fought back by making their own. Homebrewing boomed in the late ’70s, and by the early ’80s that movement morphed into the new trend of microbrewing.

Two things fueled the boom, Gatza says, both part of McDonald’s tale.

“First, more people were traveling the world and tasting an English bitter or a German weiss and they knew there was a lot more to beer than pale lagers,” Gatza says. “As the world shrank, people got the idea they didn’t have to accept the status quo.”

Second, the homebrewing boom gave people confidence that they could make these beers themselves.

As McDonald came home from his travels to start brewing in his woodshop, the first small-scale startup breweries were popping up in the Pacific Northwest and Colorado. By the time he began putting together investors, 74 microbreweries were up and running. When Boulevard opened in 1989 the number had risen to 174.

“We’ve been fortunate to have a strong wind at our backs, starting when we did in an industry that was rapidly growing,” says Krum. The cultural moment, too, was right. “From 1900 to the 1970s was a time of homogenization. When I was a kid you ate Wonder Bread and your parents drank Folgers Coffee. Now there are dozens of artisanal breads and coffees. It’s part of a cultural shift.”

In 2009 some 1,500 craft breweries (the most in 100 years, according to the Brewers Association) were making beer—and making the American beer scene the toast of the world.

“There are a lot more taste choices now,” Gatza says. “There’s a much greater understanding of beer styles made all over the world, and American brewers in the past 30 years have dived into those styles and in a lot of cases Americanized them. There was not much in the way of Belgian-style ales made in America 100 years ago, but now there are 100-plus breweries making it.”

Says McDonald, “The United States has the best beer culture in the world now, even over Belgium and Germany, I think, and definitely over England.

There’s more going on in the U.S. today than anywhere else in the world—the amount of brewers, the experimentation that’s going on.”

McDonald isn’t interested in taking over the world. Rather than add more states, Boulevard will expand market share in states it already serves.

“I like selling beer close to home,” McDonald says. “I hope we get farmers out in western Kansas drinking Smokestack beer.”

To think of cowboys in Bird City and Ulysses, ranchers in Cimarron, Burdette and Bazine pulling a cork on a bottle of Long Strange Trippel or Saison Brett or Harvest Dance brings a smile. “I’d love to see that,” he says.

It’s not so farfetched considering the straightup American labels heartlanders swore by are now foreign-owned. With the sale of Anheuser-Busch to the Belgian-Brazilian company InBev, Boulevard now bills itself as Missouri’s largest American-owned brewery.

Buy American sentiment and the increasing popularity of the local and slow food ethos promise good things for craft brewers, McDonald believes. “I see a huge opportunity for people to look at beer the same way they look at food. I think Americans are going to support locally owned breweries.”

Could a humble mix of water, yeast, hops and malted grains be a vehicle for change?

“Why not,” he says, again with the grin. “Buy local beer and reduce your carbon footprint.”

Now there’s an ad slogan John McDonald can live with.