

There's something captivating about those tempestuous days when the ever-changing weather churns up white-capped waves and whips up ominous cloud formations in the skies over the Great Lakes. For the founders of Stormcloud Brewing Co. in Frankfort, the name of their business was crafted in recognition of people gathering at the lakeshore to watch a storm roll in. The idea behind the brewery was creating a spot where the community could congregate and enjoy a craft beer, in Stormcloud's case.

Brian Confer, who once made a living as a commercial photographer, turned a home-brewing hobby into a new career by tapping local entrepreneur Rick Schmitt to get the business off the ground.

The pair transformed a vacant building next door to The Garden Theater — a nonprofit that Schmitt and others operate through a friends' group — in downtown Frankfort. In the summer of 2013, they opened the 16-tap brewery, just two blocks from the Lake Michigan shoreline, to rave reviews.

To set himself apart from the growing number of breweries popping up around the state at the time, Confer focused on Belgian-style beers that are rich in historical tradition and are known for their distinct malt-forward flavors. He's also proud to support local agriculture by sourcing Michigan-grown hops from Hop Alliance for his herbaceous IPAs (India Pale Ale) and the brewery's flagship Rainmaker pale ale, among other seasonal and year-round brews. He also used malt from Traverse City's Great Lakes Malting Co.

Stormcloud's small but mighty menu features inventive Midwestern cuisine that includes artisan flatbreads, shareables, sandwiches, salads, and an array of decadent, flavored craft popcorn such as truffle



TASTING ROOM

Mixing Popcorn, Curling, and Beer

Chill out and warm up at downtown Frankfort's Stormcloud Brewing Co.

BY
Dianna Stampfler

oil and fresh parmesan or honey siracha. Throughout the winter, visitors can sink their teeth into Burger Fridays with beef, black bean, and rotating specialty burgers.

Beyond the food and beer, it's Stormcloud's cozy, inviting atmosphere that brings in locals and visitors even on the coldest, snowiest winter days.

"There are tons of great trails for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing near Frankfort, the southern gateway to the Sleeping Bear Dunes," Schmitt notes. Sections of the 22-mile Betsie Valley Trail — which was formally named a Pure Michigan Trail in 2025 — traverse throughout the county along a former Ann Arbor Railroad bed. The trails are well-suited for winter fat-tire biking. The brewery is also about 15 miles from Crystal Mountain Resort, making it a popular après-ski destination.

Visitors to the Cloud, as the brewery is affectionately known, also can try their hand at curling — a 16th century Scottish



Above: Warm up on a wintry day at Stormcloud Brewing Co. **Left:** Burgers and chips are popular fare.

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sport where two teams of four players each slide large granite stones down a sheet of ice toward a series of concentric circles at the end called the “house.” Regulation play consists of 10 ends (similar to an inning in baseball), with all eight players throwing their stones and the team with the most points at the conclusion of play being named the winner.

Often referred to as “chess on ice,” curling for men was first played at the inaugural 1924 Winter Games in Chamonix, France, but it wasn’t until the 2010 Vancouver Games that it became a medal sport — thanks to the enthusiasm of Canadians. Curling in men’s, women’s, and mixed doubles will be among the games on tap at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Milan-Cortina, Italy, where Michigan-born Delaney Strouse of the Traverse City Curling Club hopes to compete.

While there are a handful of curling clubs around Michigan (see related Discoveries story in this issue on U.P.

curling page 84), Stormcloud offers weekly leagues and open public play on its outdoor ice sheets. Learn to Curl lessons are available on Saturday afternoons from mid-January through mid-February, weather-permitting.

As the outdoor ice sheet isn’t refrigerated like indoor rinks, temperatures must be at or below freezing for optimal play. Stormcloud’s sheet is also considerably smaller than the Olympic size of 150 feet long by 16.5 feet wide, making it more approachable for new, beginner, or amateur players.

Those taking a break between games or simply spectating can warm up next to the beer garden’s outdoor fire pits while sipping hearty brews such as the Nightswimmer Stout winter seasonal (at 7 percent alcohol by volume, ABV), which help keep the chill at bay.

Inside the taproom, a variety of board games such as Shut the Box, Risk, Code Names, Tapple, and miniature tabletop

curling, as well as decks of cards for pick-up games of Euchre, encourage competition paired with a pint or flight. Wednesday nights are reserved for Trivia Tournaments and there’s almost always a sporting event — including curling, in the winter — being shown on the TVs.

In addition to the downtown pub, Stormcloud opened a 13,000-square-foot production facility and seasonal Parkview Taproom (open during the summer season) on the east end of town in the spring of 2018. It’s there that the brewery’s canned and draft beer is produced for sale around the state. ≈

Plan It!

Stormcloud Brewing Co.
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Right: A curling patron moves a large granite stone down a sheet of ice, while Belgian-style beers flow from the tap.

