

America's craft brewers are redefining beer.

BY AMY PATUREL

UNTAP

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: 1) Craft breweries, including Ninkasi Brewing Company, Eugene, Oregon, experiment with adjunct ingredients such as coffee and chocolate. 2) Ninkasi co-founders Nikos Ridge, left, and Jamie Floyd. 3) & 4) Heavy Seas Beer, Baltimore, is one of the leading cask-conditioned producers in the country. 5) Big breweries such as Samuel Adams have been capitalizing on beers boasting seasonal ingredients.

Historically, American beer was a yellow fizzy beverage that provided quick refreshment in an easy-to-tap bottle or can. The beverage of choice for backyard cookouts, frat parties and football games, beer naturally became part of the homogenization of America in the '60s, '70s and '80s.

“Americans got swept up in convenience over quality, and the big breweries capitalized on that shift, convincing Americans there was just one kind of beer—and it all tasted like Budweiser,” says Jamie Floyd, co-founder/founding brewer at Ninkasi Brewing Company, Eugene, Oregon. But when President Jimmy Carter legalized home brewing in the late 1970s, the brewing world changed. Veterans who fell in love with European beer during the war came back to the U.S. and tried to recreate those flavors.

Since then, growth in the craft beer industry has risen unabated for more than two decades, with more than 4,200 breweries today compared with fewer than 100 in 1978. From 2004 to 2014, the U.S. government approved more than 17,000 new beer labels, according to Julia Herz, spokesperson for the Brewers Association, Boulder, Colorado, and co-author with Gwen Conley of *Beer Pairing: The Essential Guide from the Pairing Pros* (Voyageur Press, 2015).

In light of these intoxicating statistics, one thing is clear: Americans' love of beer shows no signs of waning. But the way they define good brew has changed dramatically. No longer a urine-

PHOTO CREDITS Above and opposite, clockwise from above: 1) & 2) Stevi Saylor Photography 3) & 4) Heavy Seas Beer 5) Boston Beer Company



PEP

colored, largely flavorless concoction, beer today represents a painter's palette of colors and a chef's arsenal of ingredients. And American lager is losing market share, down to 60% compared with 90% in the '80s.

No matter how you sip it, beer has become far more than a college co-ed libation. The craft variety is even gaining ground on the culinary landscape, with white-tablecloth restaurants offering a smattering of options, not just alongside Coke or Pepsi, but as a category in its own right. Even sommeliers are getting in on the action, pairing bold beers with myriad dishes.

FARM-TO-KEG

Taking a cue from the farm-to-table movement, today's brewers are incorporating herbs, spices and even foraged tree bark into their signature beers. Whether you call it farm-to-keg, culinary brewing or any other hip moniker, adding flavorful ingredients to the brewing equation is a bit like donning a toque.

"You have to think like a chef, keeping your senses open and grabbing inspiration wherever you find it," explains Jeremy Kosmicki, brewmaster at Founders Brewing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

As early as the '90s, craft breweries, including Founders and Ninkasi, gained notoriety for experimenting with adjunct ingredients such as coffee and chocolate. More recently, citrus beers, including grapefruit India pale ales, orange-infused brews and berry-flavored shandy have taken the industry by storm. Crafty brewers are even foraging ingredients closer to home to create a sort of beer terroir that's becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

"If an ingredient can bring forth flavor, it has probably gone into a beer, or somebody is soon to discover it," says Herz. In fact, you'll find beer brewed with everything from mango and pineapple to basil, elderberry and nettle.

Scratch Brewing Company, Ava, Illinois, is a great example. The farmhouse brewery started on a shoestring with three brewers

foraging adjuncts from nearby woods. Soon the trio was crafting beer with seeds, leaves, roots, fruits and fungi. Saison with chanterelle mushrooms occasionally appears on the rotating menu.

It turns out that such ingredients not only offer a sense of place to locals' beloved brew, but a hit of nostalgia, too. "People will come in and try a beer, and say, this reminds me of a tea my grandmother used to make," says Marika Josephson, one of Scratch's founding brewers. "The beer then becomes a vehicle for transporting people to a different time and place."

In addition to mushrooms, Scratch's brewers have crafted a series of beers with ingredients they literally pulled off trees, specifically, maple, cedar, birch, sycamore and oak. "We used as many parts of the tree as we could to really capture its essence—leaves for bittering, the nuts and hulls of the nuts for flavoring, and in one case, a special hickory bark that you can pull off the tree because it's shaggy," says Josephson.

BRINGING BEER TO THE TABLE

In the wake of the craft beer movement, there's no doubt that beer, like wine, can be a serious, complex culinary complement. Yet somehow it still flows on the fringes of a typical high-end experience.

"The idea that beer can be a legitimate part of a meal has struggled for a long time to gain acceptance," says Julia Herz, spokesperson for the Brewers Association, Boulder, Colorado, and co-author with Gwen Conley of *Beer Pairing: The Essential Guide from the Pairing Pros* (Voyageur Press, 2015). But with the craft beer culture experiencing an unprecedented renaissance, restaurateurs and sommeliers alike are rethinking beer's potential at the table.

More people are pairing beer with meals in lieu of—or in addition to—wine. It's not for the sake of pushing the envelope, but for uncovering the most unique or interesting pairing. Often, that's wine, but sometimes, beer is the better choice.

"Beer lends itself to so many different flavor profiles," says Herz. "While most styles of wine ferment out most residual sugar, that's not the case with beer. Sugar adds intensity and mouthfeel. It adds residual sweetness that balances the bitterness of hops or the bitterness of foods. Residual sweet also calms sweet, so beer with dessert is a huge opportunity." In fact, when oatmeal stout meets chocolate cake, the results can be transcendent.

The public is catching on. According to a joint study by the Brewers Association and Nielsen, 88% of craft beer drinkers enjoy their beer with food, and nearly 60% claim they're likely to select a specific beer style based on what they're eating.

With those stats in mind, some establishments are even "optioning" beer specifically aligned to their menu. It's called branded beer. Ocean City, Maryland-based chain The Greene Turtle Sports Bar & Grille, for example, serves Heavy Seas Shell Raiser Pale Ale, an easy multipint-session beer with a nutty sweetness and herbal hop finish that pairs beautifully with nearly everything on the menu.

"For our custom cask program, we have something like 3 million combinations people can choose from," says Christopher Leonard, brewmaster/manager of operations, Heavy Seas Beer, Baltimore. From the hops to the wood to the locally sourced adjuncts, barkeeps and restaurateurs can essentially create their own beer to pair with their favorite foods. "It's a true collaboration," Leonard says. The proof is in the pint.

After toasting the bark in the oven, brewers transferred it to the boil as they were brewing the beer. The resulting brew had an amazing smoky marshmallow-like character, says Josephson. With such a labor-intensive processes, none of Scratch's beers stay on the menu year-round. Instead, they are brewed according to the seasons.

But Scratch isn't the only brewery crafting seasonal beer. Big breweries, from Samuel Adams to Sierra Nevada, have been capitalizing on beers boasting seasonal ingredients—pumpkin and spice in fall, pine, cedar and cinnamon in winter, shandy in spring and citrus-hinted hefeweizen in summer. Dessert beers are trending, too, with a growing number of breweries incorporating ingredients such as chocolate, coconut and berries into traditional recipes.

"Putting out a standard American lager or brown ale just isn't exciting anymore," says Ninkasi's Floyd. "There has been this evolution of the consumers' palate. They want more complexity in their beer."

AGING ALES

Crafting bold beer goes beyond throwing in adjuncts during the brewing process. Traditional barrel aging—whether in wine, whiskey, bourbon or scotch barrels—allows brewers to cash in on beer's complexity because, like wine, beer evolves over time.

"I put those beers in the prestige category, because they're hard to get," says Floyd. "The customer is paying for a high-end experience, not just a bottle of beer."

Samuel Adams was among the first to push the envelope, back in 1994, with its Triple Bock beer aged in a whiskey cask that reportedly boasted the market's highest alcohol by volume (ABV) at the time, 17.5%. It has since released 3,000 bottles of Millennium (aged in bourbon barrels, 21% ABV), and Utopias, its biggest beer to date, selling for a whopping \$200 per bottle (blended with vintages dating back to 1992, ABV hovers around 30%). The taste of all three beers, according to reviewers, is a highly spirited mix between vintage port, fine sherry and old cognac.

The longer the beer stays in the barrel, the more of the bourbon, whiskey or scotch character it absorbs. "Both Founders' Backwoods Bastard and Kentucky Breakfast Stout, or KBS, are aged in oak bourbon barrels for about a year," says Kosmicki. "But since the brewer releases the beer on a specific date, and it takes months to make the stuff, the same label may house beer that has been aged anywhere from 6 to 18 months. Every barrel is different."

OPPOSITE Left to right: Mango Magnifico, Dirty Bastard, Imperial Stout and Acacca IPA



Founders even dabbled in maple-syrup-hinged brew after a local maple syrup maker offered the brewery his used barrels. The end result was a mouthwatering Canadian breakfast-style beer, Project PAM, that's made with black IPA and a cornucopia of hops.

The trouble is that producing the aged beer is complicated, and most breweries don't have the resources to pull it off. Not only do breweries have to secure the barrels, which can be tough with multiuse whiskey or scotch barrels, but aging also requires time and a separate climate-controlled warehouse—both hot commodities in the brewing world.

The upshot is that breweries interested in aging beer are able to keep production small at the price they want. And they sell out immediately. That's just one reason why limited releases generate so much buzz. There just isn't enough to go around.

TINY BUBBLES

Part of beer's return to its roots has been a bubbling interest in cask-conditioned brew. Unlike keg beers, cask beer is unfiltered, unpasteurized and still contains live yeast. As such, the beer continues to develop and evolve until it reaches the pint.

"That's the traditional way of brewing beer," explains Christopher Leonard, brewmaster/operations manager at Heavy Seas Beer in Baltimore, one of the leading cask-conditioned producers in the country. "The yeast is still in there doing its thing, so it allows the person drinking the beer to feel more connected to the brewery." Traditional brewers even call the elixir "real ale."

Some pubs keep strong beers in a sealed cask for a year or more to allow the flavors to fully develop. Others tap and sell them quickly. Either way, brewers serve cask-conditioned beer without any extraneous gas, usually by manually pulling it up from the cellar with a hand pump. The net result is a beer with a bolder taste, more character and a dramatically softer carbonation than its keg counterparts. The bubbles only rise and swirl when you agitate your pint.

"If you're used to beer having a cold carbonation and a bubbly feel, drinking beer from a cask may be off-putting at first," says Leonard. "Instead of tingly cold bubbles lingering on your tongue, you taste the malt, the hops, the esters that the yeast has produced."

In fact, cask brew is typically served at cellar temperature, around 55°F, to really let those flavors come through.

The caveat: Because the beer is still developing inside the cask, every person who touches it before it reaches the glass makes an impact. From the brewer to the transporter to the retailer and barkeeper, if there's a kink in any of the chain's links, the beer may not drink the way the brewer intended and the consumer may have a bad experience.

For those reasons, even breweries known for crafting "real ale," including Heavy Seas, say cask-conditioned beer is a miniscule part of their business. "For 10 gallons of cask-conditioned beer we probably spend three times the amount of labor as we do for 10 gallons of beer in a keg," says Leonard. "And we sell about 38 barrels of cask-conditioned beer each month. That's only about 1% of our production."

Still, folks such as Leonard say cask-conditioning is worth the hefty labor costs. "When there's cask-conditioned beer on tap in a pub, it stands out," he says. "Even in the best beer bars in the country, you'll see 50 taps, but only one or two hand pumps for cask beer."

Whether foraged, aged or cask-conditioned—or even just flavored IPA—the one thing crafty beers have in common is anti-homogenization. Every cask, every barrel and, in some cases, every bottle is unique. And that puts intense pressure on beer brewers to innovate and create.

Folks such as Kosmicki wouldn't have it any other way. Sure, these inventive brewing methods are challenging (they're fragile, they're developed from limited resources, and there's an uphill battle in terms of brewing to specification), but they're also shifting the beer conversation to something more nuanced, something special and unique—and something that allows imbibers to explore a wider range of flavors, all within a single stein.

"There's no turning back from that," says Herz. "The cap has been popped off American lager. Now, the sky's the limit." ■

AMY PATUREL, A FREELANCE JOURNALIST BASED IN TEMECULA, CALIFORNIA, WRITES ABOUT FOOD, WINE, TRAVEL, HEALTH AND FITNESS.