



In 2010, to mark its 30th anniversary, Sierra Nevada embarked on the Sierra 30 Project, in which it collaborated with founders of the craft-brewing movement to create four unique, limited-release beers. Here, Ken Grossman, founder of Sierra Nevada Brewery, pours a glass of one of the beers for Jack McAuliffe, who founded New Albion Brewery in 1976 and inspired homebrewers to try their hand at commercial brewing. Grossman and McAuliffe brewed Jack and Ken's Ale for the project.

# Flavor First!

Craft beer pours a pint of taste on the American palate.

By Jan Tegler

**Y**ou cannot help but marvel at the limits to which beer is being taken these days. That's what I thought as I rolled a mouthful of "Older Viscosity" over my tongue while sitting in a booth at ChurchKey, one of America's leading beer bars, situated just seven blocks north of the White House.

Brewed by Port Brewing Company in San Marcos, California, Older Viscosity is a dark strong ale, aged in American oak bourbon barrels. Black as night in color with a malty nose and extremely rich, this high-alcohol beer (12.5 percent by volume) yields an array of pleasing tastes – bourbon, chocolate, and dark caramel up front with a slightly coconutty finish. It's immensely enjoyable to sip, transporting the average beer drinker to a savory new place.

It's also a fine example of the flavorful heights to which America's latest generation of craft beer brewers are taking craft beer. In fact, "flavor first" could be the unofficial rallying cry of the craft beer movement that is overtaking the United States. Mostly for better, though occasionally for worse, flavor is the common element that has propelled the movement. As a result, Americans now have an unmatched bounty of tasty beer available to them.

The Brewers Association (BA, an organization dedicated to supporting small and independent American brewers) defines craft beer as a product made by small, independent brewers that produce less than 6 million barrels per year. Further, they identify more than 100 different styles of beer and list more than 1,700 American brewers as of 2010.

Those astonishing numbers include everything from India Pale Ales, Belgian-style Tripels, and German-style Kolsch to American-style Golden or

Blonde Ales and craft brewers in every region from sea to shining sea. Behind the figures is a national craft beer community incorporating craft breweries and their tasting rooms, and affiliated and non-affiliated brew pubs. There are beer festivals and "beer week" celebrations in almost every American city. Start-up businesses associated with every aspect of the craft beer industry are vibrant and growing. And there's an amazing wave of craft beer-dedicated social media. Craft beer blogs, websites, and publications ... there are even iPhone apps for craft beer!

The foregoing doesn't even begin to describe the variety of craft beer or the pioneering being done by craft brewers all in the name of flavor. There's a three-decades-old American revolution in beer that hasn't crested yet. If you're out of breath like me, take a pull of your favorite craft beer and step back.

## CRAFT BEER HISTORY

"America is first and foremost a beer-loving nation," says Julia Herz, craft beer program director at the BA. History and the BA's own statistics bear out her observation.

Taking a leap back to the late 19th century, we see that America once had almost half again as many beer brewers as it does currently. According to the BA, the United States boasted 3,200 breweries in the 1870s. In an era before widespread distribution, most Americans drank a variety of ales supplied by local breweries just as their forebears had.

The Boston Beer Company, brewer of Samuel Adams, was founded in 1984.

And, like the craft brewers of today, many of the nation's founding fathers made their own beer. They also used it as a kind of currency, reportedly paying soldiers in beer during Colonial times.

More varied and more localized, beer was an American staple until the early part of the 20th century, when legislative fiat led to a historic upheaval in the world of beer, wine, and spirits.

Prohibition changed everything.

Between 1920 when the 18th Amendment went into effect and 1933 when the 21st Amendment reversed Prohibition, the majority of American breweries that had operated prior to the legislation ceased to exist.

What's more, the Cullen-Harrison Act (the bill that overturned the 18th Amendment) only authorized the sale of beer and wine with an alcohol content of no more than 3.2 percent by weight (apparently considered too low an alcohol concentration to be intoxicating). This may have helped foster "a change for the blander" in the American palate and the nation's view of beer.

By 1980, beer industry consolidation left the United States with just 42 breweries and forecasts of further mergers. Light lagers produced by macro-brewers including Anheuser-Busch, Miller, and a group of slightly smaller producers dominated the landscape, driving the growth of the industry among men and a growing cross section of young females. But the seeds of the craft beer revolution had already been sown.

Homebrewing took off as a hobby in the 1970s for beer enthusiasts eager to experience "old world" beer traditions and styles that had long vanished from American shores. As this grassroots culture spread, a few pioneers took it to a higher level, giving birth to the "craft brewing" industry.

Many credit the launch of the New Albion Brewery in Sonoma, California, in 1976 as the starting point for the American craft beer renaissance. Founded by Navy veteran and homebrew enthusiast Jack McAuliffe, New Albion offered a pale ale, a porter, and a stout – styles America's macro-brewers wouldn't have anything to do with. More importantly, the brewery inspired a generation of homebrewers to try their hand at commercial brewing.







Greg Engert speaks to a table of guests (above) at Birch & Barley in Washington, D.C. Sister restaurant to ChurchKey, Birch & Barley is a fine-dining eatery dedicated to the creative pairing of craft beer and food (right, top and bottom).



Through the 1980s, a small collection of craft brewers pioneered “micro-brewing,” producing small quantities of full-flavored beers in an expanding range of styles. Jim Koch, Harry Rubin, and Lorenzo Lamadrid were among the most successful of the era. The three founded Samuel Adams (The Boston Beer Company) in 1984, and by the end

of the decade the brand was the best selling craft beer around. In 1989, the company brewed an unheard of 63,000 barrels of Boston Lager. It was a tiny drop in the bucket compared to the production of the macro-brewers, but in the mid-1990s craft beer took off.

As many RROC members may recall, “microbrews” were hot in the

early part of that decade, and by 1995 Americans were awakening from their lager-induced slumber and beginning to recognize a rapidly emerging segment of small, mostly regional craft brewers. Ambers, porters, stouts, and ales began to show up on the American beer scene again

with annual volume growth for microbrews increasing from 35 percent in 1991 to a high of 58 percent in 1995, according to the BA.

But it was a phenomenon that ultimately faded. Herz refers to it as a “fad.” Between 1997 and 2003, the microbrew craze hit the skids with

growth slowing to less than 5 percent yearly. Many microbrew brands failed and disappeared. Greg Engert, beer director for the Neighborhood Restaurant Group and managing partner in ChurchKey and sister restaurant Birch & Barley, thinks he knows why: America wasn't quite ready for craft beer.

"In the mid-1990s, the movement couldn't support the amount of microbreweries that opened," he contends. "People were pushing too much and craft beer hadn't organically spread to the average consumer. They had yet to distinguish craft beer from all beer."

CRAFT BEER 2.0

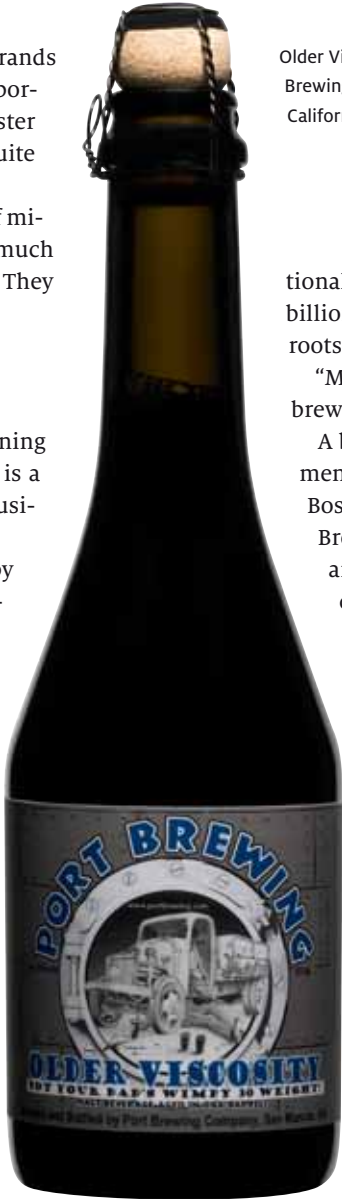
Though the movement had slowed it certainly wasn't dead. Beginning in 2004, craft beer mounted a stirring comeback. Its resurrection is a multifaceted tale, equal parts cultural phenomenon and small business success story.

The second time around, craft beer is more widely understood by both the general public and craft beer brewers themselves. Herz reasons that a broader shift in how Americans view food and their communities is one reason for the long-term viability of craft beer.

"This is a steady, consistent trend now, not a fad," she insists. "Many things have changed in the last 20 years, including American tastes. As Americans have come of age around the new millennium, what we eat and how we approach food and the products we purchase is different. That has gone hand-in-hand with local food businesses having success as people have become more conscious of small, local enterprises. That's especially true for beer. People want to support their local brewery. It's something they seek out and as I always say, 'what feels good tastes even better.'"

Small, local craft brewers have made inroads with the wider public, partly due to the trend Herz cites – a reaction to "globalization" and global brands – and, she continues, because the word about craft beer has spread as never before.

"Before the early 1990s, no one was really saying, 'I've heard about awesome ales from England, where can I find them?' We



Older Viscosity is brewed by Port Brewing Company in San Marcos, California.

didn't have what I call 'trickle up economics.' Now we do. We have beer lovers walking into their local establishments and saying, 'Why don't you carry my local beer brands from the brewery down the street?'"

That local interest has led to a national boom for craft beer. The BA puts craft beer sales for 2010 at \$7.6 billion. That's impressive, especially for a niche industry that has its roots in "basement brewing."

"More than 50 percent – and probably over 75 percent of today's breweries – originated from homebrewing," says Herz.

A big difference in the craft beer revolution 2.0 is the business acumen of the brewers now involved. From the biggest craft brewer, the Boston Beer Company, to other major craft brewers like Sierra Nevada Brewing Company, New Belgium Brewing, Dogfish Head Brewing, and Great Divide Brewing Company (to name just a few), today's craft beer leaders are more than flavor-first enthusiasts – they're enthusiastic entrepreneurs.

"Part of the reason for the second surge in craft beer is that the brewers who survived the first wave in the 1990s learned not just how to be better craft beer makers but better business people," Engert says. "That, coupled with the mediums through which the message about craft beer is getting out, has really helped propel it."

CRAFT BEER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

"Craft beer appeals to people of all ages really but I think young people are the biggest audience," says craft beer devotee and blogger, Margie Bennington. "They're driving its popularity not just in traditional social settings but online."

Bennington is part of a large community of craft beer lovers who are spreading the word about their favorite beverage via the Internet. She and her boyfriend, Alex Westholm, are the pair behind BeerCouple.com, one of a new breed

Courtesy of Port Brewing and The Lost Abbey

of websites dedicated to the adventures and social scene that surround craft beer.

Like many of her 20-something contemporaries, Margie came of age as craft beer made its comeback. Not initially a fan, she became one when introduced to it by Westholm. The two quickly discovered a burgeoning community of fellow enthusiasts online, all eager to share their passion and their knowledge. In the spring of 2010 they created their own website as a means of connecting with that community and documenting their own adventures in craft beer.

They are not alone. According to Beerbloggersconference.org, there are now more than 1,000 citizen beer blogs worldwide with new additions everyday. Created by private citizens, these are not promotional websites. Nevertheless, they are helping to get out the word about craft beer as never before, introducing the uninitiated in myriad ways.

Believe it or not, there are now web-based craft beer personalities, many of whom use Twitter and other social media to share their latest finds in craft beer with an audience of followers who likewise comment on everything from new brands to new venues to experience craft beer.

“People do ‘Tweet-ups,’ where you get on Twitter.com and decide to drink the same beer at the same time,” Bennington reveals. “Everyone drinking it then Tweets about it. So I can be sitting in the middle of nowhere and as long as I have Internet access I can sit down and drink a beer and talk about it with someone else anywhere in the world.”

Beyond the blogosphere and Twitter there are a range of websites, including BeerAdvocate.com, GreatBeer.com, and the BA’s own CraftBeer.com, designed to introduce the many aspects of the

craft beer world to newcomers. From how to taste, identify, and evaluate craft beer to information on specific brewers, brewpubs, and homebrewing, the online community is helping to make this more complex – and yes, more expensive – beer approachable.

Meanwhile, iPhone apps, including “Untappd,” allow you to tell others what you’re drinking and where and see what they are drinking, perhaps inspiring you to try something new – maybe while watching TV featuring craft beer. In late 2010, the Discovery Channel aired a series called *Brew Masters* featuring the trials and tribulations of Dogfish Head Brewery.

#### A SAVORY SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

As wondrous as the virtual world of craft beer may be, it’s the beverage’s ability to bring people together in varied settings in the real world that draws them in.

“It’s not about getting drunk,” says Bennington. “It’s about having a social experience around the beer and tasting it for the sake of ... tasting it.”

That brings us back to ChurchKey in northwest Washington, D.C., heaven and a haven for craft beer lovers. One of the most sophisticated beer bars in the country, the establishment elevates the craft beer experience to a new level. It’s not just ChurchKey’s continuously rotating selection of 50 craft beers on draught from across the United States and beyond, the 500 available bottled beers spanning the globe, or the five cask-conditioned ales on offer. It’s not even the three walk-in coolers that keep different craft beers at temperatures (42, 48, and 54 degrees) appropriate to their style or the four different glycol boxes that keep draught lines at those temps all the way to the taps.



Social media can take some of the credit in building the popularity of craft beers. Twitter, beer-devoted blogs, and iPhone apps like Untappd spread information and spark discussions about craft beers, even inspiring drinkers to try new brews.

The place doesn’t feel like an English pub. Or a neighborhood watering hole. It’s emblematic of what craft beer can be at the high end. Dyed-in-the-wool craft beer enthusiasts are part of the scene for certain, but this is an upscale hot spot for a trendy D.C. clientele. And if what’s going on upstairs in ChurchKey is impressive, a walk downstairs leads to a world where craft beer truly gets on a level playing field with wine.

Birch & Barley is ChurchKey’s sister restaurant, a fine-dining eatery dedicated to the creative pairing of craft beer and food. The restaurant is among the foremost exponents of this increasingly popular trend, and Engert is its high priest.

Steeped in English literature with graduate degrees from the Goethe Institute in Munich, Germany, Trinity



The sophisticated ChurchKey in Washington, D.C., elevates the craft beer experience to another level.

College in Dublin, Ireland, and Georgetown University, Engert ditched the world of great books just as the second surge in craft beer got under way. After a stint at the Brickseller (one of the nation's original beer bars) and an in-depth study of beer history and culture, he joined the Neighborhood Restaurant Group in 2006. Since then, he has been on a crusade to elevate craft beer.

"I think ChurchKey and Birch & Barley are completely singular," says Engert. "There's no restaurant or bar together that are anything like this."

Headed by two master chefs, Birch & Barley offers a constantly updated five-course tasting menu nightly, pairing different craft beers in four 4 pours with ingredient-driven cuisine.

"Great ingredients with a subtle chef's hand will allow the ingredients to speak," Engert enthuses. "I think it makes sense to pair them with something that further announces the ingredients' flavors. Beer is up to the task. Wine, being fruit based, has acidity. Acid isn't seen much in the foods we eat, so wine works well with food but more as an additional, final ingredient. Beer, because of the complementary aspect of its rich malt sweetness, mingles with and embraces food. Sometimes you don't know where the food ends and the beer begins."

As an example, the house-made cavatelli with ricotta, roasted pork, local broccoli rabe, pine nuts, and aged provolone pairs beautifully with an Alt-bier from maker Uerige. There's also a honey-glazed duck breast dish that goes splendidly with Gouden Carolus Classic, a dark ale from Belgium. Judging by reviews, the packed house upstairs, and the difficulty of getting a reservation downstairs, Engert, ChurchKey, and Birch & Barley are on to something.

#### THE DICHOTOMY OF CRAFT BEER

The preceding barely scratches the surface of the craft beer world, a sector growing so rapidly you would think it was taking over the beer industry worldwide. But it turns out that the \$7.6 billion in 2010 sales of craft beer represents only 6.3 percent of the global beer market.



"That sounds like a lot," Herz admits. "But the total beer segment is about a \$101 billion per year industry. The major global brewing companies account for about 80 percent of the industry. In that context, 6 million barrels is not so much."

Nevertheless, Herz says that craft beer's growth over the last seven years (up to 60 percent per year for some brewers) has been nothing short of amazing.

"It's small American business at its best," she says.

And despite Machiavellian state and federal distribution laws and taxes, which favor macro-brewers, craft beer industry pros maintain that the comparatively small craft beer world won't lose momentum anytime soon.

Engert argues that comparing craft beer to the wider beer market isn't even fair. "It's really a different business. I say that craft beer is 100 percent of its own market."

Perhaps Bennington sums it up best when she says that craft beer is more than an industry.

"It's about being experimental and pushing the limits of what beer can be. It's really a spirit."

For those of us who put flavor first, here's to it!