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Why Independent Breweries Need You Now More Than Ever

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, February 21st, 2018

For a while, the story of [craft beer](#) in America was easy to fall in love with. Independent breweries were not only producing high quality product and giving you new brewpubs to enjoy, they were also chipping away at the market share of brewing behemoths that have reduced beer down to something hardly resembling beer.

When you buy Coors, Bud, Miller, or knockoffs thereof, it tastes like you're drinking slight variations of the same thing. Even the labels lack art. It's liquid muzak — cheap beer hovers in the background, providing a mindless, cheap yellow stream to facilitate your elevator trip to old age. With craft beer, you're taking the stairs and stopping on a landing to gaze out the window.

There's so much going on with the craft brewing industry, it's hard to keep up. In 2017, an [NPR report](#) summarized the situation:

One thing is clear to craft beer brewers, lovers and lobbyists: They feel they're under attack by what they bitterly call "Big Beer" or "Big Alcohol."



[Wikimedia](#)

Are they really under attack? In part, the story of American craft beer is still the story of underdog upstarts reveling in their craft, their independence, and their community. But the story is also mired in litigation and buyouts.

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In Florida, for example, [craft beer companies are facing legal challenges](#) from the Florida Retail Federation, which happens to include MillerCoors and Anheuser-Busch. The Federation is challenging the craft brewers' practice of selling beer to brewery patrons in tasting rooms. The challenge originates from America's three-tier system for selling beer. Under that system, producers (brewers), distributors, and sellers must be independent of each other. Brewers have to sell beer to distributors, who then sell to stores. However, small breweries that also have tasting rooms or pubs (brewpubs) can be classified as both producers and sellers, which grants them a loophole to sell their beer onsite in many states.

That's part of the appeal for independent breweries. You can go in, sit down in a cozy setting and

drink a fresh beer brewed onsite. There's a distinctly Old World appeal to brewpubs. They create a culture like bars, speakeasies, and public houses do, but they're also wrapped up in people's livelihoods in the same way restaurants are. While a bar simply benefits from selling as much alcohol as possible, a brewpub benefits from investing time and craft into making beer unique. There's more passion of craftsmanship. Starting with simple ingredients, brewers add water and yeast culture, then with brewpubs they provide a place where people can congregate, and human culture springs up around them. That's a story as old as human history.

This story is not safe from big corporate brewers like Anheuser-Busch (which is now AB InBev, thanks to a merger with the multinational European company InBev in 2008). For them, beer is a business that has nothing to do with community and culture. They'll litigate, merge with other huge brewers, and buy out small brewers until market share for independent brewers is miniscule like it once was.

[Jim Koch](#), founder of Boston Beer Company, points out that "After years of 15 percent growth, the craft sector is down to the single digits." He means growth in market share. One of the main factors influencing this shift is the buyouts. Breweries like Ballast Point, Elysian, Goose Island, and 10 Barrel became popular and successful enough to lead the craft beer market into a semi-competitive standing against a huge conglomerate corporation like AB InBev. Instead of creating craft beers to compete, AB InBev makes huge buyout offers to the little guys and then uses their brands.

Jim Koch points out that, "Drinkers buying cute-sounding brands like Goose Island or Terrapin or Ten Barrel are often unaware that these brands, some of them once independent, are now just subsidiaries of AB InBev or Molson Coors, which are not transparent about disclosing their true ownership anywhere on the bottle."

Of course, brands like Goose Island and Ten Barrel don't have to sell out. For every Goose Island, there's a brewer that has declined Big Beer's big bucks. Yet Koch's point is that many consumers don't know the difference between the independent guys and Big Beer subsidiaries.

In response to this, the [Brewers Association](#) For Small and Independent Craft Brewers introduced the Independent Craft seal in 2017, so that consumers can tell which brands are independent and which aren't.

There's always an elephant in the room, and in this case the elephant looks a little — well, old and busty. Craft brewers aren't famous for their light, low calorie options, and there's evidence that drinking too much hop-heavy craft beer [can cause men to develop "man boobs,"](#) and can contribute to erectile dysfunction (but it can help women with menopause). Many craft beers also have a higher alcohol content, and [excessive alcohol consumption contributes to signs of aging.](#) Danish researchers from National Institute of Public Health at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense point out that pronounced signs of aging indicate poor health.

Craft beer isn't always roses like marketers might like you to believe (some of it tastes terrible), but you could say that about any kind of alcohol — it depends on how much you drink. Studies have shown [moderate drinking correlates with cognitive health and longevity.](#)

Independent brewers provide something multinational conglomerates don't: culture, unique craftsmanship, and an independent ethos that doesn't answer to a boardroom. Big breweries provide robotic consistency and a product you can drink constantly without thinking about it. This is how it goes in high-stakes, relatively free markets where the consumer has to regulate by voting

with their wallet. If you want independent competition and all the beers that come with it to prevail, provide support. If not, there will still be people brewing their own all over the place, it just won't be quite as easy to find it when and if you want it.

Featured image/Tama Leaver/ [Flickr](#)

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