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COVER STORY

At the tippling point

Roll out the barrel, beer lovers are eager to taste local microbrews.

By Todd Martens

August 16, 2007

ON a recent Friday night, three collegiate-looking young men strode into the 3rd Stop, a beer and wine bar near the Beverly Center. The first one to the bar was sure of what he wanted.

"Give me a Blue Moon," he told the bartender, referring to the citrus-tinged wheat beer from the Coors Brewing Co.

When he was politely informed that the 3rd Stop didn't carry Blue Moon, he stared blankly at the 30 or so tap handles before him. Staring back was an assortment of beers that will likely never be advertised during an NFL game: Craftsman, Allagash, Green Flash, Pizza Port and Stone Brewing, among others.

The bartender suggested a Craftsman 1903, a beer that pours honey gold with a fluffy, inch-thick white head. A bit of corn, and maybe some nuttiness, comes through in the light, slightly creamy beer. The young man accepted the bartender's suggestion, and before he even set the glass down, he declared, "I'll take two more."

What this patron likely didn't realize is that Craftsman 1903 is brewed here in Los Angeles County -- its kegs often hand-delivered by the company's 46-year-old founder, Mark Jilg. Craftsman is at the forefront of a long-overdue microbrewing renaissance in Los Angeles, where beer appreciation has long played second-class citizen to the region's wine culture. More bars and restaurants than ever are forgoing industrialized suds in favor of artisanal -- read: richer, less fizzy -- beer.

Craftsman, a 13-year-old microbrewery situated in a business park in Pasadena, has doubled its output in the last year alone -- all from its nondescript headquarters in a mini-maze of one-story edifices. There, marked by a beer keg and a 1946 Studebaker truck, operates the three-employee company that hopes to capitalize on a newfound beer awareness in Los Angeles, a city long stereotyped as a beer wasteland overrun by the "big three" -- Anheuser-Busch, the Coors Brewing Co. and the Miller Brewing Co. Angelenos pride themselves on being ahead of the curve, yet the microbrew explosion of the last 15 to 20 years was a trend that seemingly passed by L.A.

"There was a big pop in the '80s with microbrewers," says Sang Yoon, who presides over Santa's Monica's Father's Office. "Then there was a lot of consolidation, and a lot of people failed, and there wasn't enough product in L.A. for people to build a business around. The trend came and left L.A. before it became a restaurant or bar trend here, even as places in the Pacific Northwest were doing fine. It didn't stick here."

As to why, no one has a definitive answer, but everyone has a theory.

"It just seems like L.A. is a big city full of longtime tourists," says Chris Patterson, who runs downtown's Spring Street Smoke House, a barbecue joint currently showcasing the work of Torrance-based Angel City Brewery. "Like any tourist, you stick with what you know."

Or perhaps this trend-obsessed city simply bought into Madison Avenue's image of beer. Better to stick with wine -- a beverage marketed for the discerning palate.

"Someone needs to do a sophisticated beer movie, like a 'Sideways' for beer," says Christian Frizzell, who co-owns downtown's Redwood Bar and Grill, which stocks Craftsman. "Then L.A. will get beer."

Suds lust

L.A. always had a sprinkling of designated beer emporiums, such as Father's Office or Pasadena's Lucky Baldwin's, but it's becoming increasingly common for bars and restaurants to embrace the work of Craftsman and other top California microbreweries. Newcomers such as the York in Highland Park or Beachwood BBQ in Seal Beach, as well as celebrated eateries like the Hungry Cat in Hollywood, trade as much in hipster cool as they do distinct flavors. But perhaps the surest sign that Craftsman has arrived -- and indeed, craft beer in L.A. -- is the fact that Jilg's beers are now on tap at SoCal offerings from the Hillstone Restaurant Group, including Houston's and Gulf Stream.

"Right now, in the L.A. scene, there are a bunch of places that are starting to address the whole spectrum of what beer is," Jilg says. "It really is the tipping point, where decision makers -- restaurant owners and bar managers -- are realizing that beer is more than the big three."

And craft beer is growing around the country. Denver-based nonprofit the Brewers Assn. reports that sales of craft beer were up 12% in 2006. The trade group has craft beer representing about a 3.5% share of the overall beer market, up from 3.2% at the end of 2006.

Those numbers jibe with trends the larger American brewers are seeing. Anheuser-Busch's vice president of import, craft and specialty beers Andy Goeler says craft beer might even have a slightly higher percentage of the overall U.S. beer market, putting the number above 4%. "We're starting to see the urban areas, and L.A. being one of the big ones, where the craft brands are really taking hold," Goeler says.

Most urban areas are already associated with a brewery. San Francisco is home to Anchor Steam, San Diego boasts the presence of Stone Brewing, Chicago is linked with Goose Island and New Yorkers raise a pint from Brooklyn Brewery.

But L.A.?

"Los Angeles has the Father's Office," says Greg Koch, chief executive of Escondido-based Stone Brewing.

Gabriel Gordon, who recently opened Beachwood BBQ, used to live down the street from Father's Office. "You mention a bar because L.A. totally lacks in breweries," he says. "San Diego has dozens of good breweries, and six to eight that are phenomenal, world-class breweries, like Stone, Pizza Port, AleSmith and Green Flash."

Not counting stand-alone brew pubs, L.A. has three -- Craftsman, Angel City and fledgling Skyscraper Brewing.

Developing a taste

There are many theories behind L.A.'s dearth of breweries. "I always thought it had something to do with the weather," Angel City founder Michael Bowe says. "Los Angeles is a very warm, temper place, and if you go to Portland and Denver, those places are cold, and big beers work better."

Others, like Stone's Koch, cite business reasons. Before Stone became the largest microbrewery in Southern California, Koch was an Angeleno, even crediting defunct downtown rock club Al's Bar with inspiring Stone, since it was one of the few spots that had Anchor Steam on tap.

When craft breweries began popping up around the country in the late '80s, L.A. was no different. Celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck even got into the microbrewery game, investing in brewery/restaurant concept Eureka in 1990. It closed two years later, more than $1 million in debt, The Times reported.

Brewers like Jilg believe it forever branded L.A. as a non-beer city. After all, if Puck couldn't sell craft beer in L.A., who could?

"One failure discourages five or six start-ups," Jilg says.

It may sound as if it's oversimplifying L.A. beer culture to lay the blame on one notable bust, but Koch assures it isn't. Despite opening his brewery outside of San Diego, Stone brought some L.A. baggage down south.

"We were turned down early by three sports bars," Koch says. "They had Eureka, and it failed. They said, 'I don't want to deal with you guys again.' We were all lumped together, as if Stone Brewing as going to follow the path of Eureka. It really is amazing what an unrelated company can do to you with their failure."

Yet even Stone, a brewery known for aggressive, bitter beers that can be a bit of an acquired taste, can't deny that L.A. is in the midst of a craft beer renaissance. In the past 14 months, Stone has seen its account tally in L.A. rocket from 17 to more than 70.

Non-California microbrewers are also jumping in. New Belgium has been distributing its popular Fat Tire in San Francisco for nearly four years, two years before it entered L. A. Says company spokesman Bryan Simpson: "L.A. was a few years behind the Bay Area, as far as having indigenous brewers raising awareness. It's interesting, so many trends come out of L.A., so you'd it would have gone the other direction."

The importance of Father's Office cannot can't be overstated. When Yoon purchased the bar from Lou Moench in 2000, he kept Moench's dedication to craft beer, and created a world-renowned burger, turning a dive beer-bar into a fashionable destination.

That influence can be seen in the likes of the 3rd Stop, the Village Idiot, Lucky Devils and the York, among others, and Yoon will soon open a second, bigger edition in Culver City.

"It took a place like Father's Office to do beer right, to inspire the closet beer fanatics to go to a bar and be indignant that they don't have craft beer," Jilg says.

Looking back on when he purchased Father's Office in the late '80s, Moench, now a bartender at Truxton's American Bistro, says embracing craft beer came with a cost. "When I stopped selling Bud and put Widmer Hefeweizen on that tap handle, I got a reaction," Moench says. "Every neighborhood Joe who wanted a cheap pitcher of beer was just about crapping their pants. I had to educate people."

In his new space, Yoon will offer more wine. But the goal is to put beer on an equal level with a drink Angelenos have long embraced.

"Wine paved the way here," Yoon says. "The success of wine has opened the door for craft beer, as people now have a basic understanding of wine they didn't have 20 years ago. People are realizing that beer can taste like peaches, or beer can taste like a coffee, or beer can taste like a chocolate milkshake. It's a far broader palate than wine. It's like suddenly being handed a big box of crayons."

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Get your brew on

The stalwarts

Father's Office

1018 Montana Ave., Santa Monica; (310) 393-2337; http://www.fathers office.com. Before Sang Yoon turned the Father's Office into a world-renowned burger joint, this tiny outpost was waving the craft beer flag, bringing in odd and seasonal brews from Anchor Steam and Anderson Valley. At least five to 10 of its 36 taps remain dedicated to rare finds. But be prepared to brave the lines.

Library Ale House

2911 Main St., Santa Monica; (310) 314-4855; www. libraryalehouse.com. Further proof that Westsiders are spoiled, the 12-year-old Library is a dependable locale for Anchor Steam-seasoned food offerings, and strong, West Coast-style pale ales. Indeed, barkeep Leo Stanton notes the biting Race 5 from Bear Republic is one of his top sellers.

Lucky Baldwin's

17 S. Raymond Ave., Pasadena; (626) 795-0652; http://www.lucky baldwins.com. Owner David Farnworth has been knighted into the Belgian brewers guild, and you have until Aug. 26 to see why. Through the end of the week, Lucky Baldwin's is dedicating 40 of its 63 taps to Belgian offerings. Otherwise, come here for the tasty, banana clove-enhanced hefeweizen from Craftsman. Also in Sierra Madre.

Naja's Place

154 International Boardwalk, Redondo Beach; (310) 376-9951; http://www.najasplace.com . Twelve of the 76 taps at this boardwalk locale are Belgian offerings, and the approximately 30-year-old bar is known for its international flair. Yet over the past four years, the bar has diversified to include a greater selection of U.S. crafts, including multiple taps from Oregon's Deschutes Brewery and smaller-batch brews from Stone.

Stuffed Sandwich

1145 E. Las Tunas Drive, San Gabriel; (626) 285-9161; http://www.stuffedsandwich.com .

There are only nine beers on tap, but more than 70 in bottles at this anti-sports (no TVs) beer/ sandwich haven. Cali brewers gripe about the restaurant's paper cups and headless pours, but each pint is served with plenty of personality. "I don't like no head on my beers," owner Sam Samaniego says. "You want foam? Go someplace else."

The second wave

3rd Stop

8636 W. 3rd St., L. A.; (310) 273-3605. Need an incentive to try some unknown beer? Then come to the 3rd Stop for the free personal pizzas at happy hour. Stay for the wide selection, including ultra-hoppy and bitter offerings from San Diego County's Green Flash, and the spiced-up Shark Bite Red from Pizza Port.

Beachwood BBQ

131 1/2 Main St., Seal Beach; (562) 493-4500; http://www.beachwood bbq.com. There are no constants at this eatery, as owner-chef Gabriel Gordon swaps out six to eight of his 10 taps per week. Gordon posts daily selections online, pairing excellent barbecue with must-have selections from Belgian-inspired Brewery Ommegang and NorCal secret Moonlight Brewing. Soon to expand to 20 taps.

Library Bar

630 W. 6th St. (enter on Hope Street), L.A.; (213) 614-0053; http://www.librarybarla.com . Giving the post-work downtown crowd an opportunity to take a crash course in craft beer, the Library Bar provides a handpicked selection of California taps and hard-to-find bottles, including the toasted Anvil Ale ESB from AleSmith Brewing. The taps lean heavily on the latest from Craftsman.

Little Bar

757 S. La Brea Ave., L.A.; (323) 937-9210; http://www.littlebar lounge.com. When this Boston-inspired neighborhood hang first opened, it boasted Anchor Steam on tap, and thus held the promise of a strong beer selection. Little Bar is finally starting to deliver, and recently has embraced offerings from Stone, Fat Tire, Sierra Nevada and Lost Coast.

Lucky Devils

6613 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood; (323) 465-8259. The feel is that of a stylishly mod cafeteria, the food is upscale gastropub fare and the beer selection is impeccable. Taps are heavy on Craftsman and Stone, including the former's delectable Orange Grove Ale. Go for this rare L.A. find: Flying Dog's Double Dog Pale Ale, which masks an ultra-high alcohol content with citrus sweetness.

The Otheroom

1201 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice; (310) 396-6230; http://www.the otheroom.com. This chic mini-chain may have been imported from New York, but the beer is West Coast-centric, as its dozen-plus taps are likely to be filled with selections from Craftsman, Rogue, Allagash and Bear Republic, among others. Relatively new (est. 2005), the Otheroom quickly earned a rep as a younger, hipper -- albeit foodless -- Father's Office.

The Redwood Bar & Grill

316 W. 2nd St., L.A.; (213) 680-2600. http://www.thered woodbar.com. When the old drinkers' haunt the Redwood was re-opened last year with a nautical theme, Anchor Steam was a given. But this is a Craftsman bar; the beer is not only on tap, but also used in the restaurant's fish and chips batter.

Spring Street Smoke House

640 N. Spring St., L.A.; (213) 626-0535; http://www.sssmoke house.com. This 2 1/2 -year-old barbecue joint opened a 14-seat bar in January and celebrated its liquor license by diving into craft beer. Amid a choice selection of bottles, Spring Street is the only L.A. locale with every Angel City brew on tap. Order the ribs, and finish with an Angel City Abby, with an almost caramel-like sweetness.

Village Idiot

7383 Melrose Ave., L.A.; (323) 655-3331; http://www.villageidiotla.com . There are only eight taps, but four are craft beer, three from Craftsman. The other belongs to Bear Republic's Racer 5. Co-owner Charlie Conrad notes Stella Artois is the top seller, but adds, "The ones who like Craftsman and Racer 5 fit the mold of what we're looking for, in terms of [customers]. There's sophistication that comes with it."

The York

5018 York Blvd., Highland Park; (323) 255-9675; http://www.theyork onyork.com. The York brings a bit of Father's Office into Highland Park, with a fashionable setting and high-end burgers. The beer selection is small, but heavily curated, with Craftsman, Stone, Firestone and Fat Tire. Bottled fare is equally handpicked, including a surprisingly fragrant red ale from Rogue.

The higher end

Boneyard Bistro

13539 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. (818) 906-7427; http://www.boneyardbistro.com . Pair ribs or a cheese plate with a bottle and tap selection that's won comparisons to Father's Office. Broken into nearly 15 styles, Boneyard's extensive beer menu contains such rarities as Craftsman Cabern Ale, made with cabernet grapes, and AleSmith's chocolate-hinted Speedway Stout.

Osteria Mozza

6602 Melrose Ave., L.A.; (323) 297-0100; http://www.mozza-la.com . It's become common for finer restaurants to showcase their wine lists online, and Mozza is no different. But the in-demand eatery might want to give a similar treatment to its beer lineup, which boasts the Allagash Curieux, a brew aged for eight weeks in Jim Beam barrels to give it a hint of vanilla, and a dash of bourbon.

Hungry Cat

1535 N. Vine, Hollywood; (323) 462-2155; http://www.thehungrycat . com. Bar steward Tim Staehling keeps the beer selections fresh and seasonal, having recently brought in Anchor Steam's wheaty Summer Beer. Craftsman's Poppyfields, a light pale ale, is the seafood restaurant's top-selling beer. Firestone brews are also often on tap.

Rustic Canyon Winebar & Seasonal Kitchen

1119 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica; (310) 393-7050; http://www.rustic canyonwinebar.com. Wine, of course, is the specialty, but Rustic Canyon puts beer on equal footing. Opt for North Coast's fruity golden ale the Pranqster with your next cheese plate. On Aug. 27, beer sommelier Christina Perozzi will host a tasting with selections from such SoCal brewhouses as Craftsman, Pizza Port and Telegraph Brewing.

Etc.

The Yard House

401 Shoreline Village Drive, Long Beach; (562) 628-0455; http://www.yardhouse.com . In its 11th year, this chain melds Father's Office with Minnesota's Mall of America, as its selection tops off at more than 100 taps. There are seven L.A.-area locations, but it began here in Long Beach. Look for new branches in Newport Beach and downtown L.A.

-- T.M.

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Crafted locally

Angel City Brewing

http://www.angelcitybrewing.com

Michael Bowe, 54, sold his first beer in L.A. on St. Patrick's Day in 1997. Six years later, he scored a brewery on EBay. Located in Torrance's Alpine Village, Bowe estimates that about half of business caters to its yearly Oktoberfest. But the general contractor-turned- jazz musician-turned- professional brewer, who purchased a bottling line from Oregon's Rogue Brewery, is already dreaming of a day when Angel City outgrows the suburbs. "My goal is to open up a brewery downtown," he says. "I want to be the Sierra Nevada of downtown L.A. I believe that a great city not only has a great baseball and football stadium, but also has a great brewery." For now, he'll settle with having all his beers, which range from the smoothly malted Angel City Ale to the sweetly roasted Angel City Dunkel, on tap at downtown's Spring Street Smoke House. And Bowe has an easy test, albeit not a very scientific one, for what makes a good beer. "If you can't drink four pints of a beer, it's not a great beer," he says.

Craftsman Brewing

http://www.craftsmanbrewing.com

Mark Jilg spent eight years as an image processor for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory before convincing himself computers would render his position irrelevant. Rather than sweat being laid off, he opened a Pasadena brewery. That was 13 years ago. It would be five more before Craftsman became profitable. "I happen to lead an incredibly frugal

lifestyle," he says. Last year Craftsman swelled to a three-person operation, and Jilg's adventurous brews -- the fruity Orange Grove Ale or the crisp 1903, made with just a hint of corn -- are becoming regulars at L.A. bars. It's been a long time coming. "If I were making the beers I'm making in L.A. in another part of the country," Jilg says, "I'd have a tail wind instead of a head wind." Father's Office owner Sang Yoon agrees. "Craftsman is really doing something unique and different," he says. "Mark adheres more to subtlety and nuances. No one else in California does that. At the same time, he's a freak when it comes to using botanicals and herbs and fruits." Jilg hopes to launch a bottling line soon.

Skyscraper Brewing

http://www.skyscraperbrewing.com

Philip Sutton became a home brewer while a grad student at the University of Utah -- a move inspired out of frugality. "Salt Lake is a cool town, but a six-pack of Sam Adams costs about $13," says Sutton, 32. Sutton then spent four years working in the Bay Area for an Internet start-up, and when returned home to L.A., he missed the NorCal beer scene. Perplexed by the lack of L.A. breweries, Sutton decided he "needed to do something about that." Sutton's Skyscraper Brewing officially opened for business earlier this year. He's already bottling, and plotting a Christmas ale. Thus far, Sutton has two beers, an Anchor Steam-inspired Lug Nut Lager and his Bulldozer Honeyweizen, a brisk wheat beer laced with honey. "My stepfather is from this area, and his beer of choice is Miller Lite on the rocks, so yeah, L.A. is not the beer town San Diego is," Sutton says. "But I think I can make it here." Sample Skyscraper at Matt Denny's Ale House, 145 E. Huntington Drive in Arcadia.

-- T.M.

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