

The Brew Crew

Intro: The craft brewing business is getting crowded, but the owners of two Chattanooga breweries say there's room for more.

There are Davids and Goliaths in every market, but when it comes to craft brewers, it can be hard to tell who's who.

The Brewers Association allows a brewer to churn out six million barrels a year and still call itself "craft." That puts Sam Adams in the same category as Nashville's Blackstone. And then there are those brands like Blue Moon, which is quietly a MillerCoors product — so what you have is a market with no clear differentiator between macro and micro brewers.

Remarkably, in an environment of overcrowded shelves and big companies identifying as craft, a real lover of truly handmade beer can still find vibrant, authentic brewing scenes across the country. And in recent years, Chattanooga has become one itself.

"When we opened in 2010, not many places in town were into craft beer yet," says Mark Marcum, co-owner of Chattanooga Brewing Company. "But our Imperial Pilsner was generating a lot of attention."

Chattanooga Brewing Company is now six years old — but the name is 126 years old: originally founded by German immigrants in 1890, the brewery ran strong until 1909, when Prohibition rolled into Tennessee. Mark, a home brewer and lover of craft beer, realized the name wasn't being used and decided it was time to bring it back. With fellow brewer Jonathan Clark, he re-founded the city's oldest brewery. Their pilsner was a symbolic start: a classic German lager that connected the company to its namesake.

"It's not the original recipe," Mark says. "But I do know from the original founders' background what kind of recipe they probably used, which is why our pilsner is a Munich Helles from the Southern part of Germany."

Mark and Jonathan's offerings go far beyond their pilsner. Their menu is extensive and constantly changing — because brewers, by nature, are always looking to conquer new flavors, and their fellow beer drinkers are always looking to try them. It's a jolly community of pioneers.

And brewer Melanie Krautstrunk would tell you it's a long tradition: centuries ago, James Hutton and William "Strata" Smith, the fathers of modern geology, were both explorers and lovers of beer. A former geologist herself, Melanie and her husband, Joel, named their Chattanooga brewery Hutton & Smith after those great thinkers and drinkers.

“We both had careers, but we decided to take a risk and started looking for a town to start a brewery in,” Melanie says. “We limited our options to climbing destinations, and Chattanooga hit all the points and more.”

Though Hutton & Smith is young, you’ll often find their taproom full to capacity. As demand increases, Melanie says they’re always on the lookout for what’s next, inspired by the original Hutton and Smith and their storied ability to draw something new out of something old.

But brewing isn’t all tasting and testing.

“It’s almost 90% cleaning,” Melanie says. “We work all the bar shifts, too. Everybody here wears a lot of hats. Home brewing is much easier, though at this scale it’s nice to have more than five gallons for the amount of work you’re doing.”

With all the hustle that goes into craft brewing, and all of the big beer that’s competing, being a “little guy” is a challenge even on the best days. But inevitably, there are moments that make the work worthwhile.

“When I’m in the pub, and I see someone order a second round of a CBC brew — it’s a great feeling,” says Alex Rivers, the cellar manager for Chattanooga Brewing Company.

And therein lies the tell-tale difference between the corporations and the true crafters. While the goal of big beer is to create armies of brand champions, the goal of craft brewers is to make beer for people who appreciate a good beer — no matter who made it.

So as the craft scene grows, at least locally, it’s less competition and more happy collaboration. Which explains why, when they arrived in Chattanooga, Melanie and Joel received a hearty and genuine welcome from Mark and Jonathan.

“They told us, ‘Come on. There’s room,’” Melanie says. “And we’re still of the opinion that there’s room for more.”