

FINDING COMMUNITY IN CRAFT BEER

When **Joya Taft-Dick** arrived in South Africa from the USA in January 2020, she couldn't have imagined where the year was headed. With socialising strictly off limits, opportunities to make new friends in a new land seemed bleak. But then the craft beer and homebrewing communities stepped up to prove once again that beer really does bring people together.

The cap on the bottle came off with a satisfying hiss. I experienced immediate relief: the beer would at least be carbonated. I poured the contents of the bottle into a glass. The colour looked good, the smell was right, the head at the top seemed proportional. I locked eyes with my husband before we both stared at the glass on the counter between us. "Only one thing left to test," I said before

taking my first sip. Christopher carefully watched my face as I gathered my thoughts. "It...it tastes like beer. I think it might even taste....good!"

It was late July of 2020 in Cape Town and we were well into the second government-imposed alcohol ban since the start of the Covid-19 lockdown. My husband and I had moved to the country from the US in mid-January, both to attend graduate programmes here. Two months later, lockdown began.

Given our now greatly restricted mobility, as well as the alcohol ban, I decided it was time to finally learn how to homebrew, all-grain style. As a long-time craft beer enthusiast, I had wanted to start homebrewing for a while but had failed to do so, other than a few one-off attempts using extract. Like many others, the lockdown provided the perfect opportunity to fully invest. Little did I know that this venture would provide much more than a new skill set.

THE KINDNESS OF BREWERS

After an initial brewing attempt based on a BeerGuevara-provided recipe, I was eager to pivot towards trying a saison, a style of beer I love and that I had noticed can be hard to find in Cape Town. Due to the lockdown constraints however, many of the supply shops were out of various yeast strains, including saisons.

On a whim, I sent an email off to the Brewers Co-op – a Woodstock based Co-operative where “multiple beer enthusiasts” collaborate out of one taproom and nano-brewery. After being bounced around between a few friendly but saison-yeast-less members, I was given an email address for Tim. Tim Bugler is a dentist, but also a strong supporter of all things homebrew-related. As it turns out, he had recently brewed a saison and was able – and willing – to propagate the necessary yeast for me. When asked what I owed him in return for his kind efforts, he replied: “I’m happy to assist anyone wanting to brew. Just a sample of your beer, regardless of the taste, will be fine.”

One week later I found myself at Tim’s home, my husband waiting in our small rental car, watching as I knocked on a stranger’s door. After awkward pleasantries made through masks, he handed me a labelled jar containing the precious yeast. He also rather patiently answered several of my novice brewing questions and then encouraged me to stop by the brewery where, once a week, he religiously puts a new recipe through its paces with a fellow brewer.

When the government did finally lift the alcohol ban in mid-August, Christopher and I popped down to the Brewers Co-op for a pint. We were pleased, and relieved, to see them still up and running. I chatted with Tinus, the jovial young man behind the counter as he poured our beers, telling him of my recent foray into homebrewing, and expressing my appreciation for the assistance I had received from the Co-op during my yeast search. We talked shop for a while, which included him sharing some additional helpful tips with me – where to look online for specific types of yeast or how to obtain Cape Town’s water profile – before turning his attention to a new customer.

EMBRACED BY THE CRAFT COMMUNITY

Over the next few months, Christopher and I began spending many a Friday evening at the Co-op, with dinner conveniently provided by the pizza restaurant next door. I would look forward to swapping homebrew stories with Tinus

while we sipped on pints of whatever they had on tap. One week, I brought him a bottle of my recently made pumpkin beer, a flavour he, like many South Africans, had never tried. In turn, I soon happily walked home with a bottle of his golden ale. On occasion, a fellow homebrewer would stop by to pour Tinus a taste of their latest concoction and hope for his feedback. If we were lucky and lingering close enough, we might get a taste ourselves. Reliably entertaining conversation usually followed.

One Friday afternoon, to diversify our patronage, Christopher and I walked the dog down to Shackleton Brewery, where we enjoyed a pint on their front deck. I recognised Shackleton’s founder and head brewer, Stephen Peel, from a Zoom-hosted homebrewing course I had taken back in April. I introduced myself, principally to thank him for having replied to a rather frantic email I’d sent several months prior, panicking about a possible

error during an early brewing attempt. He laughed and asked how things had progressed since, so I gushed about my various flavour experiments. He told me that it

always thrills him when novice brewers persist, and then said he’d love to taste one of my beers, should I be willing to bring one by.

Our conversation had barely concluded when a group of friends trooped out onto the deck. Initial questions about our dog’s breed quickly segued into a discussion of craft beer and the negative impacts of the lockdown on the industry. One particularly gregarious member of the group turned out to be a fellow homebrewer. “My dentist,” he told me with some pride, “is an avid brewer and a great resource...” I laughed before replying: “That isn’t Tim by any chance is it?” His eyes widened, “Yes, how did you know that?”

Later that evening back at the Co-op, I grabbed my pint from the bar and took a seat by the window with a clear view of Table Mountain just beyond a series of brightly graffitied walls. I thought about how *this* is why I love craft beer. It is a space so often infused with shared enthusiasm and creativity, and sustained by humility and humour. Those are – I would argue – the very qualities that will help this burgeoning industry survive the pandemic-laden world we continue to find ourselves in. Moving forward, a supportive and increasingly inclusive community will be key, and I am seeing evidence of just such a future.

When we moved to Cape Town, I did not expect to find a scrappy craft

beer scene here. Nor did I anticipate it providing an ample lifeline to community, especially at a time when so many other doors were closed. ☺



The craft community at Shackleton, pre-Covid



Tim Bugler shared his saison yeast with Joya - you can taste his version on tap at Long Beach Brewery



Joya sparges on her new homebrew kit

This is why I love craft beer