

HOUSTON: CRAFT BREW CITY

By Anjelica Guevara

During Beer Week in Houston, Texas, a quick Google search will render over fifty events taking place in honor of beer. It is “Tap-a-cask” night at The West End, a new bar in the Galleria Area. Thursday is \$2 Dutch beer day at Onion Creek Café in The Heights, and Rudyard’s in Montrose has its legendary “Burger and Beer” lunch special Monday through Friday. In addition, Houston has a handful of microbreweries that roll out special brews just for Beer Week, hosting beer-making and cooking classes around the city, and, making their weekly tours larger celebrations of libations than usual. This might come as a surprise to some, who are unaware of the colorful and decorated past of Houston’s breweries and the love Houstonians have for their beer. In 1837, Houston emerged as a brand new city on the map, and although it had not built up much yet, it already had a saloon.¹

Saint Arnold Brewing Company began with its Amber beer and quickly developed a variety of beers to appeal to Houston’s diverse palates.

Photo courtesy of Saint Arnold Brewing Company.



Beer has marked human societies since the Sumerian civilization some 6,000 years ago.² Egyptians used beer as a form of payment for those helping to build the pyramids, and in Medieval times, people drank beer more frequently than water, due to the water's high risk of contamination. So, it is no surprise that beer has taken on a cult-like following around the world. This adoration of beer has most recently hit the United States with a microbrewery craze. From Anchor Steam Brewery in San Francisco to Brooklyn Brewery in New York City, Americans have taken a liking to the art of brewing, and our nation's young palate is maturing. Beer-lovers no longer confine themselves to drinking Bud or Miller, now they also drink the likes of No Label's El Jefe and Dog Fish Head's Midas Touch. Houstonians stand at the head of the beer connoisseur pack, with at least five microbreweries around town from which to choose with Saint Arnold Brewing Company as our oldest and most decorated, taking home three World Beer Cups in May 2012.³ Almost 100 years before Brock Wagner and his team at Saint Arnold received those awards, however,



Houston Ice and Brewing Company's Southern Select and its brewer, Frantz Brogniez, beat out over 4,000 other entries winning the grand prize for best beer at the International Conference of Breweries in 1913.⁴

The long and storied history of brewing in Houston is said to have begun in 1849 when Peter Gabel, a Bavarian native, opened his own brewery. Although a couple of family-owned craft breweries operated throughout the late 1800s, the Peter Gabel Brewery was the most well-known.



Frantz Brogniez created prize-winning beers for Houston Ice and Brewing Company.

Photo courtesy of Magnolia Ballroom.

Founded by 1893, Houston Ice and Brewing expanded its building and changed its name to Magnolia Brewery after taking over an old ice company's production plant. Upon opening, the Magnolia Brewery held a brewery tour and open house. The festivities began at 10:00 a.m., and the beer flowed for nearly twenty-four hours, quenching the thirst of an estimated 10,000 patrons. The open house continued the tradition of open breweries, where patrons came to taste the beer at its freshest, straight from the source. Today, most large-scale breweries and even the microbreweries give tours and tastings. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Magnolia Brewery produced about 35,000 barrels of beer a year.⁵



Magnolia Brewery became Houston's first commercial Protected Landmark.

Photo courtesy of Magnolia Ballroom.

At the time, Houston breweries used the latest technologies, with steam-operated industrialized equipment in their production plants and newly-developed crown caps for beer bottles.⁶ Just as the city's beer-making boomed with three large-scale breweries employing a full complement of workers, who often got paid higher wages than laborers in other industries, Prohibition went into effect.

With the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment on January 20, 1920, the country went "dry," forcing sixteen Texas breweries to close. For Houston, Prohibition meant a loss of jobs as well as opportunity. Much like in other major American cities, one could still find beer and booze in Houston.⁷ Brewers with the know-how and spirit to produce contraband opened small-scale operations out of their homes. The nation's experiment with Prohibition failed miserably. Just a little over a decade later, in December of 1933, the states ratified the Twenty-first Amendment, repealing the law. By this time, the major players in the city of Houston had changed.

Howard Hughes Jr.'s Gulf Brewing Company produced the first legal batch of beer brewed in Houston post-Prohibition. Hughes partnered with Edwin Mergele, and they changed the face of beer in the city. The men sought out Brogniez, the man who had created the Southern Select beer that had won Houston's



Texas residents protest prohibition, making it clear that they want their beer.

Photo courtesy of Houston Press.

first beer award. Even though Mergele acquired the rights to distribute Anheuser-Busch products, the three men set out to brew the best beer under their own label. Brogniez, who continued brewing beer in Mexico during Prohibition, remained eager to use his Southern Select recipe; however, the beer's name and the recipe belonged to Houston Ice and Brewing Company. Therefore, Brogniez, who came from a long line of brewers and had developed and honed his craft, decided to make another beer and called it "Grand Prize," a cheeky reference to his original award-winning brew. For a time, Houston Ice and Brewing Company and Gulf Brewing Company had a good-spirited rivalry, but Gulf Brewing Company sustained the battle.



As air conditioning became more standard and affordable in the 1930s, more and more people considered Houston "livable," and this changed the brewing game. First, it allowed Houston's existing microbreweries to develop new techniques and beers. Air conditioning also made it possible for large-scale, mass-produced beer from the Midwest to travel to Houston without affecting quality or taste.

By 1947, Gulf Brewing Company had peaked in its production at 483,000 barrels of beer annually. The company replaced Brogniez with Charles Lieberman, a chemist whose family had been craft brewing since the Civil War. Originally from Pennsylvania, Lieberman and his family came to Houston in 1948. He desegregated the brewery, and continued to amass awards for Gulf Brewery. Just as the company hit its stride, the taste desired by Texans and Houstonians moved decidedly away

from Grand Prize. The brewery waned in popularity, and Lone Star Brewery surpassed it in both production and bottles sold.

Soon, the sleeping giant of breweries was awakened and once again changed how beer was brewed in the Bayou City. By 1964, Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company decided to open a large-scale production plant in Houston.⁸ Eberhard Anheuser began Anheuser Brewing upon arriving in Saint Louis, Missouri, from his hometown in Germany. His daughter married Adolphus Busch, who took over the company upon his father-in-law's death in 1880. Under the leadership of Adolphus Busch, the brewery as well as the entire beer industry advanced technologically. He became the first to pasteurize beer, to fully integrate refrigeration into production, and to extensively bottle beer.

At first, Busch's involvement in Houston brewing was neither large nor centered in Houston alone. While he supported the American Brewery Association in Houston, he also backed The Galveston Brewery in Galveston, Lone Star Brewery in San Antonio, and the Texas Brewing Company in Fort Worth. After the 1964 director's meeting held in Houston, it became evident that mass produced beer had a future home here. Anheuser-Busch opened a \$32 million, two-million-square-foot plant in 1965. Located off of Interstate-10 and the Washington Avenue exit, it can be seen from the freeway and the running trails at Memorial Park. The plant produced over 900,000 barrels of beer the first year. Currently, it employs over 900 men and women and produces over 12.5 million barrels per year.⁹ That said, it still does not produce enough beer for its Texas customers, and Anheuser-Busch ships beer in from other plants to quench the thirst of Texans.

In February 1968, the Gulf Brewing Company's plant

burned down, and that summer the company demolished the former brew house. By the 1970s, Houston had become a Bud town, and mass produced beer was all the average American thought to drink. One was either a “Bud man” or a “Miller man.”

Just as finding a craft brewed beer became increasingly difficult, the home brewing rage hit the states. In 1983, the State of Texas voted to allow home brewing of beer. And Houston owes its fancy beer palate to this craze.

During the 1970s and 1980s, most Americans got their first real beer education abroad. Generally through European travel, Americans became aware of the wide array of brews available to the rest of the world. Houstonians were no exception. Either they experimented with their own brews or they tried to recreate a flavor they encountered elsewhere. By 1981, Houston home brewers had their own association, the Foam Rangers, which held an annual contest for the best beer, the Dixie Cup.

At this time, people interested in home brewing in Houston sought out DeFalco’s Home Wine and Beer Supplies and its owner, Scott Birdwell, a member of the Foam Rangers. His shop became a hub for Houston home brewers, and he stood out as a well-known source for all things home brewing. Additionally, he held brewing classes. Today, Birdwell remains an integral part of the home brewing phenomena in Houston, and his shop, along with the Dixie Cup competition, remain important to Houstonians. The winning brews at the Dixie Cup competition are frequently the recipes Saint Arnold uses for its exclusive Divine Reserve releases.

During this home brewing craze, Brock Wagner, CEO

and founder of Saint Arnold Brewing Company, who had grown up in Belgium, gave home brewing a try. “My first beer that got me interested was a Pilsner Urquell. I went down to Hungry’s in [Rice] Village, and I would try a new beer each visit.”¹⁰ This gradual love for beer and flavors remained with Wagner after college when he became an investment banker. “I always wanted to own my own business,” Wagner says during an interview at the current Saint Arnold brewery located downtown off of Lyons Avenue. After spending some time in investment banking, Wagner concluded that he was bored and thought back to his college brewing experiences. “I knew there was a risk in starting a microbrewery,” but as a man with a good understanding of business as well as finances, he set out to create a microbrewery in Houston.

“I first reached out to Boulevard Brewing Company,” Wagner recalls. Based in Colorado, this microbrewery was one he had toured, and Wagner thought it was a great place to start his education. The openness and camaraderie he experienced with the Boulevard Brewing Company indicated how the microbrewery industry operated. It took more than just a good working relationship with other brewers; Wagner needed investors. Similar to the way Howard Hughes financially backed the Gulf Brewing Company, Wagner also stumbled upon a well-known investor. Ken Lay, of the now-notorious Enron Corporation, became one of the first big investors in Saint Arnold Brewing Company. Just as beer was said to mix well with oil in 1900s Houston, it apparently mixed well with Houston’s new premier industry, energy.

By 1994, Saint Arnold opened its first location at



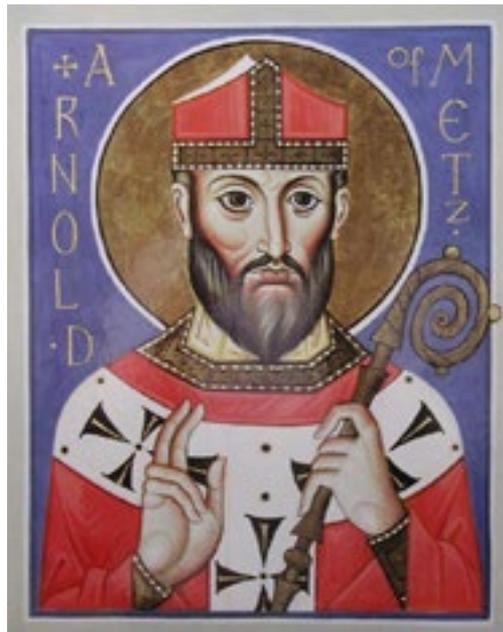
Saint Arnold founder, Brock Wagner took an interest in brewing while a student at Rice University.
Photo courtesy of Saint Arnold Brewing Company.

Industrial Park off of Loop 610 and Highway 290. Its first batch of beer went out to four Houston locations, three of which still operate today: The Ginger Man, a staple pub in Rice Village known for its varied beer selection and knowledgeable staff; Star Pizza, a local pizzeria with great ties to the city, which continues to support its local breweries; and the Richmond Arms Pub, the city's oldest British pub, that boasts over 100 beers on tap and a clientele of avid beer lovers.

Saint Arnold quickly reached its capacity and could no longer brew enough beer to match the high demand of its clientele. Wagner began to look for a larger location and found just the spot in an abandoned Houston Independent School District (HISD) building, the brewery's current location. Nevertheless, for Wagner brewing beer was not just about making money. This can be seen in the Saint Arnold mission statement to brew and sell the best beer in Texas and to create an institution of which Houston can be proud. Wagner and the company donated more money than it made its first year in business and began a grass roots advertising campaign that remains synonymous with the brewery today.

First the company painted a car in a tie-dyed pattern, stamped Saint Arnold (the beer's logo) on the car, and drove it around town. In a city known for its Art Car Parade, one can be sure that this car caused a stir. After that, it continued to advertise locally and to make connections with bar managers, bartenders, and patrons. The brewery opened for tours, much like the brewers of yore, and in 2011, more than 34,000 people attended. Saint Arnold also hosts a number of pub crawls throughout the city at different times of year, including the Montrose Halloween Pub Crawl, with a private tasting at the brewery as the top prize.

In 2005, Saint Arnold brewers began brewing the Divine Reserve line of beers. Considered to be incredibly unique, these brews are marketed to the true beer-lover. A six pack runs about fifteen dollars. Aware that this beer is not for folks who make their beer decision based upon price, Wagner states, "I wanted to create a beer that was worth the money." Based on the beer loving community's response, he has. The Divine Reserve releases look like modern-day blockbuster movie debut lines. Patrons line up outside local liquor stores hours before the stores open to ensure they get their hands on a six-pack. Wagner, though not surprised that Houstonians recognize the quality and precision that goes into the brewing of the Divine Reserve releases, admits to being shocked by the



Legend has it that when exhausted parishioners traveling to recover the remains of their bishop, Arnulf of Metz (c. 582 – 640), prayed to him to intercede on their behalf, a small amount of beer they carried multiplied to quench their thirst to finish the journey.

Photo courtesy of Saint Arnold Brewing Company.

overwhelming response to his beer. "We never had any clue that they would explode in popularity the way they did." This is understandable. In a city that had one microbrewery in 1994, it is hard to believe that a barley wine mead or Russian imperial stout sold like hot cakes.

In 2009, the brewery moved to its current location on Lyons Avenue, and Silver Eagle began distributing Saint Arnold products, giving them access to far more bars and venues. "Suddenly, we are being shipped by the same guys that deliver the mass produced products," Wagner states. It definitely helped to awaken other beer makers and lovers to Houstonians' desire for more complex, interesting, and off-centered brews.

In March 2008, Southern Star Brewery Company opened its doors in Conroe, Texas. Saint Arnold no longer stood as the only craft brewery in town. The Southern Star Brewery owes some of its begin-

nings to Saint Arnold and not just for establishing the craft brew market here in Houston. As Saint Arnold outgrew its old brewing equipment, Southern Star bought it from them. Another super suburb of Houston announced a brewery, No Label Brewery in Katy, Texas, which has boomed. Already having to expand its facilities, No Label hosts a weekend tour like Saint Arnold and draws a sizeable crowd with live music and food. Also, located downtown and relatively close to Saint Arnold, is Karbach Brewing Company. This brewery boasts a brewer who wrote the book on creating American style hefeweizen, and Karbach's Weiss Versa Wheat is a local favorite. With all of these thriving and growing craft breweries here in Houston, it is safe to say that Houston has established itself as an up-and-coming craft-beer city. Houston craft breweries have forged an active community. Wagner notes, "We have monthly brewery meetings here in Houston. Myself and the other brewers get together and talk shop, introduce new beer for feedback."

With so many bars, breweries, and beers available to Houstonians, it can be hard to choose. As you meet up with friends for happy hour and decide on that pitcher, consider one of the local brewery options. After all, Houston breweries have been making some of the greatest beer in the world for over a century.

Cheers! Prost! Salud! Sláinte!

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