



Members of the 8th Wonder Brewery staff with University of Houston connections stand behind the bar in the tap room. From left to right: Jerry Bullock, facilities; Jason Sheehy, brewer; Ryan Soroka, co-founder and hype man; Aaron Corsi, co-founder and brewmaster; Robert Mireles, packaging team; Charles Cannon, cellar person; Robert Piwonka, office analyst. All photos courtesy of 8th Wonder Brewery.

## HOUSTON'S NEW 8<sup>TH</sup> WONDER

By Matthew Desguin

**A** battle rages today about tearing down the “8th Wonder of the World,” a nickname coined by Judge Roy Hofheinz for the Astrodome during its construction in the 1960s. But now another 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder stands in Old Chinatown east of downtown Houston in today’s EaDo (East Downtown) district. The 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder Brewery pays homage to some of Houston’s greatest achievements and the people who live here and is part of an influx of craft breweries into the city, which had only a handful a decade ago.

Independently owned craft breweries brew on a much smaller scale than the macrobreweries like Anheuser-Busch, Miller, and Coors. Craft brewers tend to focus

more on producing a variety of brews and demonstrate a willingness to experiment and break from conventional brewing methods, allowing them to be more expressive in their beers. Craft brewing started in 1965 with the turnaround of Anchor Brewing Company in San Francisco, California. In 1976, the New Albion Brewing Company in Sonoma, California, formed and then served as the blueprint for future small-scale brewers. As craft breweries increased in number, many attached a bar or brewpub to their brewery as allowed by law to sell beer to the consumer directly, furthering the demand for craft beer.<sup>1</sup> This marked the beginning of the microbrewery craze in the United States.

On October 14, 1978, President Jimmy Carter deregulated the beer market, causing craft breweries to take off. By March 1986, five brewpubs had opened in the United States, and the total number of breweries rose from forty-two in 1978 to over 2,700 in 2012, reaching the number of breweries estimated to exist in the colonial period. Today, the craft beer industry employs over 100,000 people and brews 15.6 million barrels of beer each year, generating around \$14.3 billion in retail sales.<sup>2</sup>

Modern craft brewing in Houston got its start when Rice University graduate Brock Wagner, who grew up in Ohio and Belgium, opened Saint Arnold Brewing Company in 1994. Saint Arnold utilizes guerilla marketing techniques pioneered by craft brewers, using brewery tours and email marketing to grow business, and runs innovative programs such as auctioning the naming rights to its brewing vessels on eBay.<sup>3</sup> Saint Arnold stood as the city's only craft brewery until 2008. Today, the Houston area boasts over a dozen craft breweries with many more in progress.

One of the hottest local breweries is 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder, located just east of downtown at the corner of Dallas and Hutchins Streets in a "dome-like warehouse." Surrounded by three of Houston's four professional sports stadiums, they tout themselves as "THE craft beer for the home team." Additionally, many of 8<sup>th</sup>

Wonder's employees are graduates of the University of Houston, including brewmaster Aaron Corsi, who earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from UH and now teaches in the university's Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel Restaurant Management. However, his journey to 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder, which he calls the American dream, actually began in Denmark. He and his wife Maria lived in an old house on a farm where the grain for Carlsberg Brewery is grown, and he realized, "This is where beer really comes from."<sup>4</sup>

Corsi returned from Denmark in 2009 during an economic downturn and went back to school to hide out during the recession. But he soon found his passion. During his first classes, he became enamored with beverage production, which he now teaches. He put together all the information he had learned in Denmark and was able to make connections between that material and his beverage production class. Professor Glenn Cordúa asked Corsi to help out in his lab and to show the other students how to make wine, beer, and spirits.

During this time Corsi was home-brewing, making around five gallons of beer a week. Through his course work he learned about the law, marketing, and developing a business from the ground up.

Another professor introduced Corsi to a student who wanted to open a brewpub. After this serendipitous



*The 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder brewing facility and tap room are located at the corner of Dallas and Hutchins Streets just east of Highway 59 in the EaDo District near downtown.*



*The tap room décor pays homage to the Astrodome, the brewery's namesake, with a representation of the dome's roof on the wall.*

meeting, Corsi and Ryan Soroka formed an underground brewing club at the college. “He’s a brilliant marketer,” said Corsi, who realizes that Soroka excels at and enjoys marketing. “I like making the beer,” he adds. “I like doing the operations, and I like being the guy to convert something into something else.”

Corsi and Soroka decided over a few beers they would open a brewery and do it right. They took their “last \$300” and formed an LLC in 2010. They started diving into equipment designs and recipe development. After Corsi received his master’s degree, the Hilton College offered Corsi a job if he got a PhD. He decided to pursue the degree and keep his brewery interest, thinking that one of these opportunities would fail. “There is no way that all of these ideas were going to work out. But they all did,” he added with a chuckle.

Along with Alex Vassilakidis, the partners raised the money to open up their brewery, and business skyrocketed. “We couldn’t brew enough beer as soon as we opened,” Corsi said. “Texas is a slow adopter in the brewing industry, which isn’t a bad thing,” because it gives time to see what trends are coming. They had another name picked out for their brewery originally, but after a copyright dispute they decided on 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder, which just felt right. Corsi said, “8<sup>th</sup> Wonder not only means the Astrodome, but 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder is also the next great big thing.”

The location was right, too. Corsi notes, “We’ve become a tailgating mecca for the city of Houston,” two blocks from the Dynamo stadium, a few blocks from Minute Maid, a mile away from the Toyota Center, and soon to be connected to NRG Stadium via the light rail. They had looked all over town when they found the location with vaulted whiskey barrel ceilings, 5,000 square feet, and bay doors that open to a beautiful view

of downtown. “It just felt right,” Corsi recalled.

Hoping to integrate 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder into EaDo, the partners pride themselves on both the neighborhood and the city. They try to make beer that reminds people of home, and that is why their Rocket Fuel, which is a Vietnamese coffee porter, has become one of the more popular brews that they make in their Old Chinatown community. The company tests new recipes by brewing one keg at a time, and the brewers taste the beer to see if it is up to 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder standards. Once it is, the beer hits the local bars. The newly renovated tasting room is open seven days a week, and it allows the brewery to get feedback

from fans. Corsi explains, “Just because I like something doesn’t mean the consumer, our public — the reason why we’re in business — will like it.” So they get direct feedback.

The brewery celebrates the Houston community with beers like Hopston, Alternate Universe, Intellectuale, Dome Faux’m, and Rocket Fuel. Seasonal beers, such as last winter’s Dream Shake Stout, which celebrates Hakeem Olajuwon, and this summer’s Pharmhouse, an agave saison, are released on a quarterly basis. The 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder Brewery continues to develop new beers and one-off specialities available exclusively in the taproom, and Corsi is in the process of developing a beer called BrewGK, on which they collaborated with Bun B of the Houston rap group UGK, which should be released in late 2015.

Corsi’s ultimate goal for the brewery is to replicate the way “breweries were the cornerstone of the village” in medieval times and become part of the effort to bring life back to EaDo, an area that John Nova Lomax, a *Houston Press* writer, described in 2002 as “a silent, godforsaken stretch of no-man’s-land that’s not really the Warehouse District, nor the Third Ward, nor the East End.”<sup>55</sup> In 2013, 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder became a part of the push to revitalize EaDo and has not looked back, holding several events to generate interaction with the community.

Since 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder opened it has won numerous awards including a gold medal at the 2015 U.S. Open Beer Championship for its Brown Porter, Mission Control. It was voted the best brewery in Houston and characterizes the city perfectly: It is hard-working, gritty, tough, and always moving forward. Cheers!

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