

Beer Tourism USA: the New York Brewery Trail

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Sitting across a heavy oak table inside his brewpub, Pelham McClellan explains in meticulous detail the haphazard alchemy that transforms four basic ingredients - water, grain, yeast and hops - into beer. In the front corner of the room, beyond the mirrored cherry and mahogany bar, stand two gleaming silver tanks where the Market Street Brewing Company's beer is born. As the brewmaster imparts his knowledge on an inquisitive novice, his enthusiasm never wanes, even as he patiently digresses to clarify such puzzling brewing terminology as 'wort' and 'sparging'.

McClellan, along with his wife, Theresa, opened Market Street in Corning in 1997. They had been restaurant owners in this quiet company town in the rural Southern Tier for nearly 15 years when they decided that Corning needed, and could support, a brewpub and dining establishment that brews its own beer in-house. Their previous restaurant had earned a devoted following with an ongoing 'Beers of the World' promotion, which encouraged patrons to sample the 100 or so beers they served on draft and in bottles. If the town had been willing to experiment with beer from all over

the world, the McClellans thought, surely it would appreciate beer brewed right there in Corning.

To prepare themselves for their new venture, the McClellans toured breweries in Boston, Philadelphia and Toronto, soaking up information and inspiration. Pelham started homebrewing to get himself acquainted with the craft. The couple hired a brewing consultant to help them locate the equipment and supplies they would need, and they purchased and renovated a vacant building just down the street from their old restaurant. Eleven years later, Market Street Brewing is a thriving establishment that is woven into the fabric of Corning's picturesque riverfront commercial district.



'The best thing about learning the brewery business,' Pelham said, 'was how generous everyone was. Nobody's trying to keep their secrets from you. You can call them up and they'll help you out. Beer people love to talk about beer.'

Market Street is a designated stop on the New York State Brewery Trail, a recent project that was developed to promote the state's craft brewing industry and encourage tourism at its collection of nearly 60 breweries and brewpubs. (The Brewers Association defines an American craft brewer as one that is 'small, independent and traditional.' Such breweries must produce fewer than 2 million barrels of beer per year, be less than 25% corporate-owned and utilize traditional brewing methods.)

Over the course of a month in late spring, I set out to visit a handful of destinations along the Central branch - which stretches from Corning near the Pennsylvania line to Watertown on the Canadian border, and spans an east-west axis from the Finger Lakes to Cooperstown - to

see what the burgeoning American phenomenon of beer tourism looks like in this part of the country.

Before I set out, I spoke to the legislator behind the creation of the trail. New York State Assemblyman Joseph Lentol, who represents the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, doesn't drink beer. 'I'm a teetotaler,' he said jovially. 'Alcohol gives me migraines!'. But when he was approached by the Brooklyn Brewery - his home district's slick success story of a craftbrewing operation that enjoys broad national distribution - with the idea for creating a state-wide beer trail, Lentol felt a twinge of nostalgia for the days when the Knickerbocker and Rhinegold breweries were economic and cultural landmarks in his home borough. (The assemblyman has been known to burst into old-timey beer jingles around his legislative offices.) He signed on to the idea and saw the legislation through to its passage in the summer of 2006. It became the first state-wide brewery trail in the country.

'It was an opportunity for a novel idea' Lentol says. 'Our hope was that it would provide some economic stimulus for the Williamsburg area and the rest of the state, and that it would take off and people would get excited about it. Like it or not, we're a beer-drinking nation.'

The first stop is Brewery Ommegang, located on the site of a former hop farm in bucolic Cooperstown. The quaint village, set on shimmering Otsego Lake and brimming with bed-and-breakfasts, sets



the gold standard for tourist destinations in the region. Even though Cooperstown is 50 backcountry miles from any discernable metropolitan area, and a four-hour drive from New York City, beer aficionados who make the trek to Ommegang won't be hurting for other diversions.

The brewery is located along a winding country road at the end of a wide gravel driveway marked by a hand-painted sign. The building is cream-coloured, and has the look of a grand horse stable on an English country estate. On a warm June day, a friend and I parked in the dirt lot out front and followed the arrows for the brewery tour. They led us directly into what appeared to be the heart of the brewroom. In the corner immediately to the left of the entrance stood a makeshift gift shop, with a short counter and several free-standing shelving units filled with beer bottles, glassware and assorted Ommegang apparel. We approached the lanky clerk at the counter and asked when the next tour would be. He said he would show us around, but first invited us into the adjacent tasting room to sample the beer.

Ommegang was founded in 1997 by Don Feinberg and Wendy Littlefield, two beer importers from New York City who wanted to bring Belgian brewing practices to the United States. The brewery's beers are full-bodied and complex, and bear the markings of meticulous craftsmanship. Ommegang has accumulated a broad fan base among discerning beer drinkers and today the brewery sells its

beer in 48 states, including kegs that it ships to Alaska and Hawaii.

After our tasting, the guide walked us from tank to tank in the brewing area, didactically describing the function of each indistinguishable vat. We stepped over discarded hoses and dodged preoccupied brewers. When we reached the bottling line, the guide pointed out a shelf on the wall where mislabelled bottles, which Ommegang staff members are allowed to take home, were stored.

Every year, the brewery receives 20,000 visitors, and tourism is something the brewery actively promotes. Ommegang hosts parties and concerts at its Cooperstown headquarters throughout the year, and frequently joins with some of its fellow Cooperstown institutions for collaborative events. It is also part of the Cooperstown Beverage Trail, a kind of trail-within-a-trail that links Cooperstown's winery, cidery and two breweries. All of these efforts are geared toward getting beer lovers through the front door and ushering them back out again with a newfound affinity for the Ommegang brand, which is sure to be gracing the shelves of their local beer importer.

Beer tourism wasn't born on the New York State Beer Trail. In the past several decades, as the class of Americans who call themselves 'beer geeks' has grown, so too have the opportunities for them to pack up their steins and set off on a quaffing quest.

Two cities have long been vying to be the Mecca of American craft beer: Denver, and Portland, Oregon. The cities have competing claims to the title. Portland has more breweries within its borders (no fewer than 40), as well as the Portland BrewBus, a company that offers guided tours that escort visitors around local breweries and brewpubs. Denver, however, also draws large numbers of beer pilgrims, and while it may have fewer breweries, every year it plays host to the behemoth Great American Beer Festival. The festival is a trade show put on by the Brewers Association, a non-profit educational and trade organization that aims to promote American craft brewing. The festival attracts more than 400 commercial brewing companies annually, and the thousands of attendees, most of them amateur beer enthusiasts, can sample from among 1,800 beers.

As beer tourism has begun to expand beyond the borders of Denver and Portland, it has looked to its kissing cousin, the wine industry, for inspiration. Wine trails, be they commercial or municipal, can be found from Napa Valley to Connecticut. Visitors are encouraged, through brochures, ad campaigns and travel companies, to spend a few days



traipsing from one vineyard to another along a specified route. Such tours may include dinners with wine pairings or passes to other local sites. It is a formula that has functioned well for the wine industry for several decades.

Today there are a smattering of beer trails that operate on this model, some of them state-wide - Vermont and Maine have recently been added to the list - and regional, such as in Charlottesville, Virginia. David Turley, from nearby Fredericksburg, Virginia, writes a beer blog called *Musings Over a Pint*, and has been a strong advocate for organized beer tourism in his region and nationally. 'I look forward to the day when I'm following hop-emblazoned signs through the Virginia countryside,' he wrote in one post.

For Turley, a great beer tourism experience has just two key ingredients: good beer and people that care about it. His primary objective at the end of any brewery tour is to strike up a conversation with a well-informed brewery staff member, preferably the brewmaster himself. 'I like getting that insight from the brewer about what they put in,' he said in a phone interview. 'Obviously the beer samples are great, but I really enjoy meeting the people. They're always people who are passionate about what they are doing.'

When I approached the bar at the Ithaca Brewery in Ithaca, the scruffy goateed kid behind the counter asked me what

I'd like to sample before I even had a chance to ask what time the tour started. After doling out two-ounce tastes of all eight on-tap beers to me and the three friends I'd brought along, the bartender, who introduced himself as Mike, finally emerged from behind the counter to lead us into the back of the building to show us around the brewing operation.

Located a few miles south of downtown Ithaca along Route 13, the Ithaca Brewery gives off an affable, casual vibe that befits its location in Central New York's quintessential college town. On the day we visited, a Saturday afternoon, the scene inside felt more like a Friday-night happy hour. A dozen college-aged guys were downing their beer samples and back-slapping each other around two tall tables in front of the L-shaped bar. The homebrewing kits on shelves in a far corner of the room and the few cases of beer along the walls felt almost like afterthoughts.

As Mike led us around the high-ceilinged back room where all of Ithaca's brewing takes place, he gestured with a grin toward a large puddle of belching white foam on the ground, a comical by-product of the otherwise sedate brewing process. Later, he told us about the year he had spent working on the bottling line with the weary remorse of a war veteran. At the end of the tour, he launched into a five-minute soliloquy about forthcoming trends in the craft brewing industry and encouraged us all to take home a bottle of his favourite limited-edition Ithaca

brew, which he described as tasting like 'a barnyard.' One of my travelling companions leaned over to me and asked if that was supposed to be a good thing.

For most of the history of the American brewing industry, describing in positive terms a beer that tasted like a barnyard would have been a most unlikely occurrence. As recently as the 1970s, Americans mostly drank one style of beer - and its flavour was decidedly not agricultural.

'As recently as 25 or 30 years ago, there were probably fewer than 50 breweries in the country,' says Julie Johnson, the editor of *All About Beer*, a monthly trade magazine for craft brewers and the oldest such publication in the country. 'They were all making one style of beer, one that's descended from the European pilsner called the American light lager.' The straw-coloured weak-bodied beer - epitomized today by Budweiser, Miller and Coors - was, at the time, the near-exclusive brewing style of the American beer trade.

If the 1970s were the nadir of American brewing, the first two decades of the 20th century were its heyday. Johnson estimates that there were nearly 1,500 breweries at the turn-of-the-century peak, all of them catering to small geographic markets. Then Prohibition struck. In 1920, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the manufacture, sale and transport of alcoholic beverages. Overnight, commercial brewing

turned from a booming business into a federal crime. When the 21st Amendment repealed Prohibition in 1933, the American brewing industry had to reinvent itself largely from scratch. Many of the regional breweries that re-emerged were eventually swallowed up by a trend of corporate consolidation that pervaded the industry over the course of the next several decades.

Then the tide began to turn. The twin trends of regionalism and stylistic diversity began to creep back into American brewing, largely due to the work of two of the patron saints of beer aficionados. In 1977, author Michael Jackson published his seminal book *The World Guide to Beer*, a comprehensive reference tome that delved probingly into the brewing traditions of Europe and the rest of the world. It is frequently credited with reawakening an awareness of, and stoking an interest in, the plethora of global beer-making styles.

It was also in the late 1970s that Fritz Maytag III was leading the microbrewing revolution. Maytag, a great-grandson of the founder of the Maytag appliance company, purchased San Francisco's Anchor Steam Beer Company in 1965, saving it from oblivion, and slowly built it into a successful operation that set the standard for the renaissance of local brewing. By the middle of the next decade, Anchor Steam was brewing five varieties of beer, including a porter, a barleywine and the seasonal Christmas Ale - rare alternatives to the familiar lagers of the day.



Even as Anchor Steam began to gain widespread recognition for the quality and distinctiveness of its beer, it became clear that Maytag did not have grandiose designs on taking his beer national.

The 1980s saw a steady stream of craft breweries emerge, with beer entrepreneurs striving to adhere to Maytag's philosophy of localism. 'Many of them would falter', as *All About Beer's* Julie Johnson says, it takes more to succeed in brewing than 'a cute label and crappy beer' - but some would thrive, and a movement was born. Today, Johnson estimates that the number of breweries in the country has nearly surpassed its pre-Prohibition peak.

Central New York boasts its own piece of American brewing history in the Matt Brewing Company in the city of Utica. The brewery was founded in 1888 and is the second oldest operating brewery in

the country. (The oldest, Pennsylvania's Yuengling, was founded in 1829.) Today, Matt Brewing is best known for its Saranac line of craft beer, but it was the company's Utica Club brand that deserves the credit for the brewery's success and longevity.

Utica Club was a standard pilsner-inspired ale that was popular in the city until the federal government turned off the taps in 1920. During Prohibition, the Matt family continued to use the Utica Club label on a line of soft drinks. When Prohibition was repealed, Matt Brewing was the first in the nation to secure a license to brew beer and the first to sell it commercially. Utica lore says that Utica Club began brewing 16 minutes after the 21st Amendment was ratified.

A trip to the brewery, in industrial West Utica, offers a satisfying step back into the past. On the tour I took with a friend, our guide, an effervescent college-aged girl home in Utica for the summer, spent more time recounting the company's history than delivering the standard brewing lesson. She pointed out antique furniture in the brewery's anterooms and lingered over faded portraits of the brewery's founder, F.X. Matt, that were hung in the velvet-wallpapered corridors.

The tour ended, typically, in the tasting area - this one a dim barroom, adorned with carved wood fixtures that had the feel of a saloon. Unlike any other tour I'd

taken, though, this one ended with two full pints. As the tour guide poured me a glass of Utica Club (several Saranac brews, as well as root beer, are also on tap), I asked her about a shirt I'd seen in the gift shop that listed something called 'chicken riggies' as one of Utica's claims to fame. She explained that it was a pasta dish - chicken and rigatoni - and I asked her where in town I could find the best example of it. She eagerly rattled off a list of three or four Italian restaurants, asked if I wanted directions, and handed me my pint.

This place, like all of the other stops on my beer tour, was inextricably woven into the fabric of its community. The breweries I had visited imparted as much character on their surroundings as their surroundings imparted upon them. I walked to the window of the tap room, Utica Club in hand, and looked out across the faded factories, sinking into twilight. I took a long pull from the cold, crisp pint and thought, for a moment, that this must be what Utica tasted like.

The official Web site for the brewery trail, www.iloveny.com/brewerytrails, contains contact information for each of the breweries, historical facts about the state's beer industry, and exhaustively detailed travel itineraries for each regional trail.

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