

# Homebrew rendezvous

Sam Calagione

Me & some of the fellers decided to cook up a batch of home brew and the instructions on the yeast said 'add one packet and wait three days' ... so we added three packets and waited one day. Well we drank all that brew right up the very next day ... never been sicker in my life.

This is one of my favorite stories about the long tradition of experimental homebrewing in the United States. These are the words Woody Guthrie used in a Library of Congress interview he did with Alan Lomax to describe an ambitious brewing project he spearheaded many moons ago. Homebrewers and craft brewers alike have applied their limitless imaginations to bringing so much color and vibrancy back into a beer landscape that had become, at the hands of the international brewing conglomerates, monochromatic and commoditized. Charlie Papazian is rightfully recognized as the father of the American homebrewing movement. He began teaching homebrewing courses in the early 1970s at a community college in Colorado and within years his six page mimeographed course curriculum evolved into his first book, *The Joy of Brewing*. This is the book that launched a thousand craft breweries in the States, because so

many of us began as homebrewers who cut our teeth by replicating or altering recipes and techniques we first learned of in Charlie's first publication. He was also instrumental in founding the American Homebrewers Association and *Zymurgy* magazine. His book and his evangelism for full-flavored, exotic, diverse kinds of beer has set so many of us craft brewers on our paths to explore the outer edges of beer, to go beyond the light lager juggernaut that still dominates globally. Today he is the president of the Brewers Association, the trade organization that represents the vast majority of commercial breweries and the largest network of homebrewers in the United States.

Recently I was reading about one of my musical heroes, Woody Guthrie, around the same time I was reading about Charlie Papazian. I learned that the year Woody passed away in New York, 1967, was the same year Charlie graduated high school and first tried beer right down the road from there in Warren New Jersey. That timeline overlap struck me as profound. I thought about Woody's homebrewing adventure and Charlie's role in the evolution of the American homebrewing movement and my bound-

less brewer's imagination got the best of me.

Over a couple pints of Dogfish Head 90 minute IPA. I typed up a vision. What if the father of the American protest song met the father of the American homebrewing movement somewhere along the railroad track between New York and Philly? What if they sat down over a campfire, some rustic grub and a few bottles of homebrew and Woody painted a picture for Charlie; a picture of a new world brewing order, a world where homebrewers could flex their creative muscles brewing with all kinds of innovative techniques and ingredients, a world where many motivated homebrewers could transform their hobby into their livelihood and open small commercial breweries in towns from coast to coast? Here now is the actual transcript of this metaphysical meeting.

EXTERIOR - NIGHT - A CAMPFIRE GLOWS IN THE SHADOW OF A RUSTY RICKETY RAIL BRIDGE SOMEWHERE IN NORTHERN NEW JERSEY. A YOUNG MAN APPROACHES AN OLD MAN WHERE HE SITS PLUCKING A GUITAR AND SIPPING FROM A BOTTLE ON A FIRESIDE TREE STUMP.

CHARLIE: Howdy Mister. I've been walking along these tracks quite a while. Mind if I join you and warm up a bit?

OLD MAN: Sure thing young feller, I'd enjoy your company. I'm a bit of a story-

teller, you mind if I spin you a yarn while you warm your toes? I'm Woody Guthrie, here to tell you a story or two. Just got back from the nation's capitol. Things felt kinda squirmy down there. Maybe I'm just a dumb oakie but I caint always get my arms around the palatishian way. Fer instance. The national debit is one thing I caint figure out. I heard a senator on a radio a-sayin'that we owe somebody 11 trillion dollars. I don't know their name but I do remember the price. Called it the national debit. If the nation is the government, and the government is the people, then I guess the people owe the people, that means I owe me and you owe you, and I forgot the regular fee, but if I owe myself something, I would be willing to just call it off rather than have senators argue about it, and I know you would be the same and then we wouldn't have no national debit. And now they are talkin' about increasing the federal tax on our beloved beer by 150% so they can afford the new health care plan. That's the truth people. Here's an idea; since having two beers per day is good for your health -as proven in numerous medical studies - we otta drop the tax on beer and make it mandatory to drink two beers every day and soon enough we'd be fitter than a collective fiddle.

CHARLIE: I tried beer for my self a few weeks ago and didn't like it much.

WOODY: Maybe you were just drinkin' the wrong beer. I made this one my self (pops open two bottles and hands one to his new friend). Lemme know what you think.

YOUNG MAN (After taking a couple of sips) Wow this is really interesting! I didn't realize beer could have so much flavor. And you are saying you made this beer yourself Mr. Guthrie? I'll be darned, please go on with your story.

WOODY: I was talkin' 'bout the government, but what I'd really like to tell you about is how I fell out a folk singin' and fell into beer brewin'. Started when I was a young feller liven in Pampa during prohibition. I got me a job as a soda jerk. I tended the fountain, but I reckon I was really in the liquor business. I was fixin' banana splits and milk shakes up top and selling bootleg Jamaica ginger under the table. Now I am a man of vast enthusiasms. With my reading I was always more vicious than voracious - why I'd inhale whole areas of knowledge then lick my chops for more. Anyhow, I got me to reading up on beer brewin'. And I started to messin' round with my gangs brewpot. Makin' all kinds of crazy stuff using all kinds of crazy ingredients. I learned that it was a matter of funneling energy from one place to the other. Instead of ballads, cowboy songs, hoedowns and hymns, I learned up on porters, and stouts and IPAs.

Fer instance, did you know that the letters IPA stand fer Insipid - Politician - Asskicker. I did not know that. But the more I went out and sampled the different beers that were available to buy, the more frustrated I became. That corporate beer was so thin you could read a magazine through it ... hell it was so thin

even a senator could see something through it.

You see beer has always been the drink of the common man and I figured it was high time we took it back from the corporate brewers. The rich like to lull themselves to sleep and sort of float half way between a drink of scotch liquor and a tile shit house - listnin' to a raft of songs that's about as close to real as I am to forclosin' on the farm. They might know from profits but they don't know from real beer.

Anyhow, I seen the big breweries kept getting bigger and the choices of beer styles kept getting thinner. Seemed like they were all makin' the same exact beer with same exact machines and we all know that machines cannot make beer half as well as men can. In the words of Uncle Walt Whitman: 'it is not consistent with the reality of the soul to admit that there is anything in the know universe more divine than men and women.' So I got to schemin' on a proletarian alternative to corporate beer and I set myself in motion to make it a reality.

CHARLIE: You mean to tell me that beer doesn't have to be just that light flavorless stuff made at the big factory up the rails from here?

(Woody puts down his bottle and picks up his guitar - he answers Charlie's question with a quick song).

(sung)

Theeeres a brown one, and an amber one,

and a hoppy one, and a lambic one.  
And they all get put in bottles,  
Little bottles all the same.

(He puts down the guitar and continues  
with his story)

As the Second World War closed down upon us ah figured I'd get the government fore it got me. I signed up for the merchant marines and set sail from New York harbor to the European theater. And what a theater it was. I made five trips back and forth across the pond. Each time I was granted leave I used that week to go and learn me up on European brewin'. I met brewers from London, Brussels and Moscow and I traded them each a song fer a yeast strain. I even met me a covert spy brewer from Berlin that smuggled out a lager yeast inside the bowels of his Doberman pincer. These brewers were each mighty proud of their hard work and the fruits of their labors. These brewers took giant steps between heaven and nature, in witness of this immaculate fermentation. And when you tried their amazing, diverse beers you could see the reflection of their countrymen in the foamy head on the glass and, as the drinker, you too could expect to touch both heaven and nature with no more than a deep breath, a gulp, and a well bent elbow.

So I took these various yeast strains back to the states with me. And I formulated a plan with a bunch of my most passionate hobo-poet brethren to set up a network of breweries, barley fields, hop gardens and

what not along the railroad lines across this great country. Pretty soon you had Little Guy Fly brewin' Double Bocks in Omaha, Mobile Mac makin' Hefeweisens in Acron, Poison Face Tim pumping out porters in Boston and Dick the Stabber doin' Imperial Stouts down there in Dallas.

Slowly but surely a proud little cluster of countrymen started buying these beers. Folks that cared more 'bout what was on the inside of the bottle stead of the labels on the outside. Pretty soon some of the brewers got comfortable enough within this union of good beer makers and good beer drinkers to start formulatin' their own recipes or magnifying the styles we learned about oversees and makin' them their own.

Why the notion of culture itself was souped up and made more democratic. No longer was it all about Europeein fine-arts tradition - now it could include practically everything creative. It was a downright exileratin' discovery - AMERICA HAS A CULTURE - it also has a new hero - the common man - who suffers, grows, and survives. And as fer the Reinheitsgebot - that crazy Bavarian law that sez beer can only be made with water, barley, and hops - bunch a hooey. The Reinheitsgebot ain't nothing but a relatively modern form of art censorship.

Yessir, we truly built a union of good beer. It got to where brewin' and politics were inseparable in my mind. Beer is politics. To buy the beer made by the people for

the people is to organize. The struggle to popularize real beer, to make inroads against the domination of the corporate brewers - why that's a metaphor for the fight against blind capitalism itself.

Pretty soon the reviews started comin' in. Eventually all the major media bigwigs had to acknowledge our presence. But, like anything worthwhile it first started with the common people. I remember the first review I got for one of my beers. It came from a writer named William 'hop along' Hearst and it was published in the communist paper, *The People's World and Brew Kettle*, and it went something like this:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the harvest of the hops. Brew it Woody, brew it! Karl Marx wrote it. Lincoln said it and Lenon did it. Brew it Woody and we'll all get EQUALLY drunk on QUALITY together!

CHARLIE: You mentioned some fancy writers Mr. Guthrie. I have heard of Whitman and Marx. I wonder if someone were to write down these stories of beer's potential to be reborn and reinvented and share a bunch of recipes, maybe a network of brewers could expand and truly change the brewing landscape.

(Woody ponders this for a moment, opens a couple more bottles of homebrew and passes one to his friend. He puts his down and picks up his guitar again):

(sung)

Nooooo, there's no cause for worry,

cause everything is fine  
Ever since my lord turned water into  
barley wine....

I bet you could write the GREAT BOOK on home brewing someday feller. Teach a lot folk how to make beer with more flavor ... now back to my tale. As I mentioned we formed us a union of good beer. Us brewers recreated an instinctive experience, or a laboratory - a laboratory where certain bedrock strains of American culture have been retrieved and reinvented. We took us a vote and decided to call our union 'Brotherhood of the brewkettle.' Kind a like anna mona pia if you know what I mean. Don't mean much of nuthin' but it sounds kinda good. Now I like my beers big and complicated. As far as drinkin' is concerned, I never touch a drop unless I'm by myself or with someone, and I never use anything stronger than water as a chaser

Now young man, I do think you are on to something. Through your writing and evangelistic work you can prove that all kinds of beers, the drink of the common man, could line up very well with good grub, could taste so different from each other, could show as much color, diversity and potential as the American populace itself. Mighty tasty work if you can git it.

CHARLIE: Well sir, I thank you for sharing your vision of a new beer world with me, along with your delicious homebrew and company. My mind is a jumble of thoughts on how to make this work. I'm gonna head home now and put paper to pen.

WOODY: Sounds might reasonable young feller and I need you to do me a favor. Always remember and don't ever forget. The worst thing that could happen to you is to cut yourself loose from people. And the best thing is to sort of vaccinate yourself right into the big streams and blood of the people. With this sip drink of homebrew paired with homemade dessert I want you to consider yourself right vaccinated. The beers from the brotherhood of the barleycorn will suck you in like an abyss-craklin' vortex and they are guaranteed to relax the muscles of your soul.

On behalf of my croonin' and brewin' brethren the country over we want you to know we are making beers of distinction, diversity and grandeur for you. We are out to make beers that will prove to you that this is your world and that if it has hit you pretty hard and knocked you for a dozen loops, no matter how hard it's run you down or rolled you over, no matter what color or size you are, we're brewin' the beers that celebrate yourself and your work. And the beers that we brew are made up for the most part by all sorts of folks just about like you. Every man is capable of singing a wholly unique song. So I invite you to retrieve the innocence of your mind and revel in its dishevelment. You know what you like to drink better than fancy advertisement do. Goodnight my young friend and good luck!

(CHARLIE WALKS AWAY FROM THE CAMPFIRE TOWARDS HOME AS

WOODY PICKS HIS GUITAR BACK UP AND BEGINS TO STRUM THE OPENING CHORDS OF THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND ... FADE TO BLACK ... END SCENE).

When Tim contacted me to ask if I would be interested in writing an article for Brewery History I was excited for the opportunity. He asked that I write about the intersection of commercial brewing and homebrewing and how much these worlds have overlapped and enhanced each other in the American craft brewing renaissance our country has been enjoying over the last 30 years. The more I spoke with fellow craft brewers and reflected on my own path into this industry the more I realized that Charlie Papazian - his books, and his work in organizing the AHA, *Zymurgy* magazine, and the Great American Beer Festival - have been a catalyst for so many of us homebrewers turning our hobby into our livelihood. Since Charlie has always been fearless in his brewing creativity - concocting batches of homebrew with prickly pears, chili peppers and raspberries - I thought it would be fun to tell this story by taking a creative leap and conjuring up an alternative universe where two of my personal patriotic heroes came face-to-face over stories and sips of our shared favorite beverage to define the amazing path we as craft beer makers and craft beer drinkers now find ourselves upon. As Woody would say, 'Take it easy, but take it', or, as Charlie Papazian would say, 'Relax. Don't worry. Have a homebrew.'