

Foam On The Range: How Colorado's Craft Beer Revolution Informs our Understanding of the Colorado Front Range

In 1989, husband and wife brewing team Jeff Lebesch and Kim Jordan made a trip to Belgium to sample what was then the most diverse selection of beers in the world. With a few francs in their pockets and their mountain bikes in tow, Lebesch and Jordan took to Belgium's back roads in search of the Trappist breweries famous for creating uniquely flavorful brews. At the time, Lebesch simply wanted to find recipes and ingredients that would add depth and complexity to his homebrewed beer. A mere four years later, however, Lebesch and Jordan's newly opened New Belgium Brewing Company was pumping out and selling nearly thirty thousand barrels of the famous Fat Tire and Abbey Belgian style ales annually from its Fort Collins brewery. To put the tiny company's achievement in perspective, thirty thousand barrels was about 2% of what industry giant Anheuser-Busch could produce from their 130-acre northern Colorado plant in that same year.

Of course, Lebesch and Jordan were not the first small-scale "craft" brewers to find success selling craft beer on Colorado's Front Range.<sup>1</sup> The college town of Fort Collins was already home to Odell Brewing Company and Coopersmith's Brewpub in

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<sup>1</sup> Note on terminology: the brewing industry distinguishes between "nano," "micro," "craft," and "macro" breweries by the number of barrels of beer they produce in a single year. The obscurity of this distinction can lead to confusion, as many outside the beer industry still refer to larger "craft" breweries like New Belgium as microbreweries out of habit. For simplicity's sake, I will use the words "craft" to describe smaller breweries that produce several kinds of specialty beer, though many do not technically fall into the production category of "craft" beer. For more information on this distinction, see The Beverage Information Group, "2009 Beer Handbook: The Ultimate Data Resource on the Malt Beverage Industry," Beer Handbook (M2Media360, 2009).

1991 when Lebesch and Jordan began brewing beer commercially.<sup>2</sup> Since those days of hand deliveries and basement brewing, New Belgium and dozens of other Colorado breweries have grown into large operations with nationwide distribution networks. In fact, the current demand for craft beer in Colorado is so unquenchable that the state now has more than two hundred licensed breweries, giving Coloradans unprecedented choice when it comes to deciding where and what to imbibe.<sup>3</sup>

But what accounts for the fact that craft brewing took off so strongly and so early in Colorado? While growing interest in “craft” beer is certainly a nationwide trend, Colorado’s Front Range is currently the nation’s largest craft beer market, with over 74 breweries in operation as of March 2013.<sup>4</sup>

One explanation for how Colorado’s Front Range can support this ever-growing industry can be found deeply rooted in the rise of the “New West.” Shorthand for the myriad of social, economic, and demographic changes that have come with dramatically increased in-migration to the region, the New West as a concept has historically focused on a shift from extractive economies to those rooted in passive outdoor recreation. Ongoing development of regional oil and natural gas resources has recently challenged the notion that the extractive industry is fading away, but the state’s popularity as a

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops: The History of America’s Craft Beer Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 179; Brian Callahan, Interview with Brian Callahan of New Belgium Brewery, interview by Sam Bock, Digital Audio File, April 23, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Colorado Brewer’s Guild, “Fact Sheet: Twenty-One Great Things About Colorado, the State of Craft Beer!,” March 4, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. As of 2013, Colorado had the 5<sup>th</sup> most breweries per capita in the nation, and the Front Range accounted for 74 of the state’s almost 250 breweries. More sparsely populated states like Vermont, Montana, and Alaska lead Colorado in breweries per capita, but it is important to note that each of these states had fewer than 50 breweries compared to Colorado’s 250.

destination for homeseekers is easier to understand from the standpoint of the opportunities the Front Range presents in terms of “quality of life” factors.<sup>5</sup>

With the rise of America’s post-industrial economy, professionals trained in lucrative fields like computer programming or information technology gained unprecedented freedom to choose where they would like to live, and therefore often moved to communities offering attractive amenities like hiking trails or easy access to ski resorts. While participation in these kinds of outdoor activities was certainly a draw, new westerners also looked for other ways of defining a western identity for the twenty-first century. Part of the way they did so was by rejecting mass-produced lager in favor of exciting, exotic, and more expensive craft beers. At first, demand for new and innovative ales was satisfied by individual homebrewers, whose hobby was legalized in 1978. Yet, because many homebrewers were young, outdoor-oriented professionals, they recognized that demand for a different kind of beer was on the rise among people like themselves. Jeff Lebesch and Kim Jordan of New Belgium were two such westerners.<sup>6</sup>

Someone standing in downtown Fort Collins in 1991 would have inevitably seen Kim Jordan driving around town with cases of the highly popular Abbey and Fat Tire ales packed into her family’s car. Between taking her children to school and various lessons and practices, Jordan was delivering the beer she brewed with her husband when the pair were not working at their day jobs in social work and engineering. By 1994, however, Lebesch and Jordan were able to make the leap into the world of professional brewing. In 2004, just 10 years later, thanks to clever marketing geared towards outdoor enthusiasts, the changing palate of a more sophisticated beer connoisseur, and the

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<sup>6</sup> William R. Travis, *New Geographies of the American West: Land Use and the Changing Patterns of Place* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2007), 5.

prosperity of a new kind of Coloradan, New Belgium had become the nation's third largest craft brewery.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will tell the story of how New Belgium became a giant in the craft beer world, and of how Colorado's Front Range became the "Napa Valley of Beer."<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it will explain how participating in passive outdoor recreation and drinking homebrewed or craft beer became essential markers of status among white and affluent suburban professionals. Doing so will demonstrate that Colorado's now robust craft beer industry is the result of shifting demographics and the culture of amenity-seeking that grew up around playing outside.

### **A Hobby Goes Mainstream**

To see how an influx of wealthy outdoor enthusiasts might have corresponded to interest in craft beer on Colorado's Front Range, imagine looking down on the Denver Metro Area from the summit of Longs Peak in about 1994. If you had extraordinary powers of perception, you would have seen a stream of wealthy, mostly white, ex-urbanites putting down roots in Colorado and beginning to ask where to eat and what to drink. With even more extraordinary powers of perception, you would have also seen that a few of these New Westerners had come to Colorado with specialized knowledge of how to brew beer at home. As these newcomers explored the hiking trails and ski areas around Denver, they became discontent with the post-outdoor excursion refreshments on offer from brewing giants like Coors and Anheuser-Busch. For homebrewers used to drinking small batches of unique and extremely flavorful beer, the light American lager Coors and

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<sup>7</sup> Callahan, Interview with Brian Callahan of New Belgium Brewery; Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Josh Noel, "Colorado: The Napa Valley of Beer," *The Seattle Times*, October 10, 2010.

Budweiser brewed for mass consumption simply could not quench their thirst for innovative brews or impart the cultural cachet that accompanied specialized knowledge of rare and exotic ale.<sup>9</sup> As a result, this small band of enthusiastic but discerning connoisseurs decided to spread the gospel of small-batch beer by sharing what they could make for each other at home.

There was only one problem: homebrewing was still illegal. Before anyone could start selling craft beer, states would have to pass new legislation legalizing homebrewing.

After prohibition, congress gave its consent to the production of wine for private consumption, but knowing that process of making beer could easily be turned towards producing whisky, lawmakers made a calculated oversight in the wording of the Twenty-First Amendment and left home beer brewing outside the bounds of the law. Despite its illegality, between 1933 and 1978, homebrewing was not a hobby as much as it was a part of rural life in America. Most individuals who brewed at home after the repeal of Prohibition did so out of habit or tradition, and were not thinking of themselves as engaging in protest or as members of a larger beer culture. More often than not, people brewed beer at home because it was cheaper than buying it or because what was available was not particularly tasty. While bigger historical events like the Great Depression and World War II distracted congress from legalizing homebrewing until 1978, the simple

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<sup>9</sup> Coors Banquet and Budweiser are both examples of American lagers. A separate style of beer from the more common ale, lager yeast ferments at a much lower temperature and produces a much lighter tasting beer. To this day, most American lagers are designed and brewed to be generally palatable to a broad audience. Some writers have cited this lack of boldness of flavor as one factor that drove the popularity of homebrewing and craft beer in the early 1980s. See Harry Schumacher, "Imports and Large Breweries: Are Big Beer Brands Dying?," *New Brewer: The Journal of the Brewer's Association*, 2011.

fact that few were interested in making beer themselves meant that industrial breweries were the only ones licensed to produce beer at all.<sup>10</sup>

This all began to change in the early 1970s. At that time, a confluence of cultural factors including a rebranding of beer consumption as a marker of class, concern for the authenticity of local products, food safety scares, and the rapidly increasing popularity of flavorful imported lagers and ales from Europe sparked new interest in homebrewing. Homebrewing clubs like the creatively named Maltose Falcons in Los Angeles began enrolling more members, and by the summer of 1973, homebrewing had gained enough momentum that the Treasury Department warned homebrewers to “leave the beer-making to the breweries.”<sup>11</sup> In spite of government finger-wagging, homebrewers continued to pressure national legislators to remove the ban on their hobby. Though early homebrewing legislation stalled in the U.S. House of Representatives, congress finally responded to pressure from homebrewing clubs, and began to look seriously at legalizing homebrewing. In 1978, congress sent president Jimmy Carter HR 1337, a bill legalizing the private production of beer for home consumption.<sup>12</sup>

The timing was nearly perfect for homebrewing pioneer Charlie Papazian. Born in New Jersey, Papazian grew up walking rural roads in dairy country - an activity that, according to beer journalist Tom Acitelli, “presaged a lifetime of outdoor activities.”<sup>13</sup> While studying nuclear engineering and education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, a friend introduced Papazian to the world of homebrewing via a neighbor

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<sup>10</sup> Maureen Ogle, *Ambitious Brew: The Story of American Beer* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 276 – 278; Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 56–57; Charlie Papazian, Interview with Charlie Papazian, interview by Jason Hanson, November 13, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> “Treasury Warns Home-Brewers,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 1973, A3.

<sup>12</sup> Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 276–278; Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 56.

whose recipe involved a can of malt extract, sugar, water, and some bread yeast. The concoction tasted better to Papazian than anything he could buy commercially, and drinking homebrew had the added advantage of being less expensive than buying what was available in stores. Papazian began reading up on homebrewing methods and was soon producing illegal beer with his friends.<sup>14</sup>

After his graduation in the spring of 1972, Papazian found a job teaching preschool in Boulder, Colorado. While teaching children was Papazian's occupation, his real passion was for teaching adults the art of homebrewing in the classes he offered at Boulder's Community Free School. It was there that Papazian met his friend and future brewing partner, Charlie Matzen. Over the next six years, Papazian and Matzen continued to teach brewing, and in 1978, the pair co-founded the American Homebrewing Association (AHA). Though it started out small, the AHA grew quickly after Papazian and Matzen began publishing a newsletter entitled *Zymurgy* (a reference to the study of yeast fermentation). With subscribers all over the U.S. and Canada clamoring for recipes, tips, tricks, *Zymurgy* spawned a network of people interested in making their own beer and created a network of knowledge that would ferment a national passion for great tasting beer.<sup>15</sup>

Initially stunned by the popularity of their publication, Matzen and Papazian quickly realized that their tiny, Boulder-based AHA was tapping into a deep vein of popular interest in homebrewing. Part of this interest was being driven by a rejection of bland beers on offer from large-scale breweries. As *Zymurgy* contributor Alan Toby

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 58; Maureen Ogle, *Ambitious Brew: The Story of American Beer* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), 280.

<sup>15</sup> Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 78; Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 305; Charlie Papazian, "On Growth, Support, and the American Homebrewer's Association," *Zymurgy*, 1980, 2; Stan Hieronymus, "Zymurgy: AHA At the Beginning," *Zymurgy*, 2003, 7.

announced in 1983, the rise of home and small-scale brewers meant that the new brewers could leave behind the “thin and watery stuff in a carbonated can.”<sup>16</sup>

With so many people literally tasting the benefits of homebrewing and rejecting mass-marketed American lagers, it is easy to understand how Papazian and Marzen’s knowledge and enthusiasm for homebrewing - along with their dedication to supporting brewers through *Zymurgy* - might have brought hundreds of students to Papazian’s brewing classes and even supported Lafayette’s Mile High Masterspargers homebrewing club. But the question remains why the Front Range in particular supported such a concentration of interest in learning how to make novel beer. After all, most early interest in homebrewing came from the West Coast and from small homebrewing clubs in the Northeast. The answer, in part, is that Papazian and his fellow brewers were all drawn to the Front Range by the opportunities it presented for those seeking to play and party outside. For Papazian and Matzen, these opportunities came in the form of huge “Beer & Steer” parties the duo threw just outside of Boulder.<sup>17</sup>

The first of these large but informal gatherings were held in 1979 on open space land in the foothills north of Boulder, and combined Matzen’s love for good food, Papazian’s knowledge of craft beer, and the pair’s shared love for the outdoors. The parties were raucous affairs featuring pit-roasted meat, local music, and lots and lots of homebrewed beer. The 100 or so attendees of Beer & Steer I were mostly acquaintances of Papazian and Matzen, or were Papazian’s students at the Community Free School. Despite a small mishap involving an overpowered motorized spit turner that lobbed large

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<sup>16</sup> Papazian, “On Growth, Support, and the American Homebrewer’s Association”; Alan Tobey, “The Case for Local Beer,” *Zymurgy*, 1983, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 320; Charles Marzen was listed as the “feast services coordinator for the annual Beer and Steer” in the Spring 1979 edition of *Zymurgy*. See *Zymurgy*, Vol. 2, no. 1, p. 3.



hunks of raw beef at high speed into the ground, Beer & Steer I was wildly successful and spawned a yearly tradition. In fact, in 1982, Beer & Steer III drew over 400 participants from all over Colorado's Front Range.

But for many early revelers already familiar with the burgeoning craft beer movement through their association with Papazian and Matzen, Beer & Steer parties were more than simply excuses to drink beer with friends in the woods outside of Boulder. When word of the Beer & Steer gatherings spread through the homebrewing community, annual attendance became a marker of insider status. As a form of cultural capital, recounting stories of partying inside the frigid cloud that engulfed Beer & Steer II or talking about the brewers who parachuted into Beer & Steer IV or the became powerful means of self-identification and helped transform an impromptu gathering of people with shared interests into an extremely popular social event. By Beer & Steer IV, these annual had become were so popular that one of the event's organizers overheard a ticketless would-be-reveler remark that he was "going to show up anyway," despite increasing attempts to control attendance and curtail the potential for the party to get out of hand.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond the appeal of Beer & Steer parties as indicators of social cachet, the gatherings were the first times that two New Western past times came together: drinking flavorful beer and playing outside. After all, it is no accident that some of the first Beer & Steers were held at the Heil Valley Ranch in Lefthand Canyon, northwest of Boulder. For Papazian and Marzen, the collective enjoyment of beer paired naturally with the collective enjoyment of the outdoors. Of course, Papazian and Marzen were well-known figures in the rapidly growing Front Range craft brewing community, and their very

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<sup>18</sup> Charlie Papazian and Charles Matzen, "Beer & Steer," *Zymurgy*, March 15, 1979, 1.

presence in the area drove interest in homebrewing. But Beer & Steer parties came to shape beer culture around the country as *Zymurgy* readers were treated to annual accounts of the parties in articles dedicated to recounting Beer & Steer hijinks. In this way, homebrewed beer drinkers not only became accustomed to the concept of enjoying their brews against a mountain backdrop, but began to associate beer drinking with culture of outdoor recreation that had emerged around this time on the Front Range.<sup>19</sup>

While it should be obvious that the nature of Beer & Steer parties required an outdoor venue, another glance through the pages of *Zymurgy* reveals deeper cultural associations between Front Range homebrewers and passive outdoor recreation. In the Fall 1979 issue, Papazian penned a column entitled “Traveling with Homebrew.” Full of tongue-in-cheek quips like, “If you plan to backpack, remember that alcohol is lighter than water,”<sup>20</sup> and “Homebrew is also terrific for repelling / forgetting centipedes, scorpions, rattlesnakes, cockroaches, ants, wind, rain, snow and flat tires,” the article was entirely focused on the kind of traveling done outdoors and on foot. Although the word “traveling” appears in his title, Papazian never mentions any kind of recreation that might be conducted on a motorized vehicle. The assumption being, one surmises, his readership would understand that “Traveling with Homebrew” was really code for backpacking with homebrew.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 60; Hieronymus, “Zymurgy: AHA At the Beginning”; Emil Dimantchev, “Overview Section: Recreation Nature Based Recreation in the Rockies: The New Value of the Region’s Resources,” Colorado College State of the Rockies Report Card (Colorado Springs: Colorado College, 2011). See Appendix A.

<sup>20</sup> Charlie Papazian, “Traveling with Homebrew,” *Zymurgy*, 1979, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 11-12.



*Figure 1: Papazian enjoying home brew while on a backpacking trip in the early 1980s*

Furthermore, Papazian's assertion that, "it's not only EASY but practical to take homebrew along – even to remote areas" suggests that *Zymurgy* readers in the late 1970s were becoming more familiar with public lands as places to escape from the demands of the post-industrial world of offices and commutes.

Dialing back his witticisms for just a moment, Papazian declares, "Most of us need some time for our nervous systems to leave the working world worries behind."<sup>22</sup> As he goes on to suggest, the addition of homebrew to a backpacking trip would "keep your mind off of those worries until the moment you must return."<sup>23</sup> Considering that major advances in outdoor recreation equipment at around this same time were

making it easier than ever for Americans to make prolonged trips into the woods, it is easy to see why homebrewers with disposable income might be drawn to the wilderness as a place of escape.<sup>24</sup>

### **Making the Leap Into Craft Brewing**

Though Papazian and Marzen were undoubtedly held in high esteem for their organizational efforts at the Beer & Steer parties, the Great American Beer Festival (GABF) quickly supplanted Beer & Steer as the premiere event in American craft

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Papazian, "Traveling with Homebrew," 12.

brewing. Following a 1982 visit to the Brewers Association of America's annual gathering where he met brewers and executives from mainstream regional breweries, Papazian became convinced that the needs of even smaller regional breweries were not the same as those of craft brewers. Papazian was determined to expand demand for craft brews in the beer market, and to begin building connections between people who loved to make small-batch beer. To this end the AHA decided that their annual homebrewing competition should be aimed at a wider audience, and thus the Great American Beer Festival (GABF) was born. Merging their fourth annual homebrewing competition with the GABF, Papazian and Matzen printed announcements in *Zymurgy*, inviting guests from all over the country to come to Boulder on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1982. That first year, about 850 people attended the GABF, and as very few had been exposed to the world of homebrewing, the program offered instructions on how to taste and talk about various styles of ale and lager.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 2: Announcing the Great American Beer Festival in a 1982 issue of *Zymurgy*

Pausing for a moment to inspect the language Papazian used to describe various beer flavors offers an instructive look at the culture and the cachet that was a side-product of craft brewing. Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the program for the "American Homebrewers Association's Fourth Annual National

<sup>25</sup> Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 92; Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 319.

Homebrew / Microbrewery Conference and National Homebrew Competition” offers an insight onto the creation of the budding language of beer connoisseurship.<sup>26</sup>

By 1982, homebrewers and craft beer drinkers were beginning to accumulate experience with different kinds of ales and lagers, and yet they did not yet have a common method of identifying or communicating about the tastes that defined various styles. Characterizations of beers as light, bitter, or sweet almost fit the bill, but were too broad and did not convey the special qualities of a truly innovative beer. As such, the GABF’s organizers drew on existing beer knowledge and on the established language of wine tasting to describe the various flavors that characterized each style of beer. Words like “flowery” were appropriated to describe the bitter, hoppy scent and flavor of pale ales while the word “malty” was coined to convey the sweet, earthy flavor of darker brown ales, porters, and stouts. Returning to Bourdieu’s notion that cultural capital can be transmitted, we can see that learning to talk about beer – noting that an ale has a “malty body” or a “hoppy bitterness,” for instance – simultaneously signaled insider status and functioned as a sort of initiation. Thus *Zymurgy*’s publication of tasting notes should be seen as an attempt to expand the tribe of beer connoisseurship at a time when the craft brewing industry was struggling mightily to get off the ground and every member counted.

Of course, cultural capital was not the only incentive for homebrewers to attend the GABF. In fact, for many would-be craft brewers, economic capital was front and center. For budding professionals, the 1982 GABF offered a chance to rub elbows with

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<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986); Hieronymus, “Zymurgy: AHA At the Beginning.” The first GABF was actually just a small part of the AHA’s fourth annual homebrew completion, though it quickly grew to become the AHA’s premier event.

other craft brewers from around the country and with representatives from larger regional breweries like Yuengling & Son. The generally convivial atmosphere allowed craft beer pioneers to gather tips and pointers on beer making and beer marketing from larger, more experienced firms while gathering ideas for new styles from fellow homebrewers. Over the next decade, the GABF would expand to include dozens more beer breweries, would help define categories and flavor profiles for various styles, necessitating a move to more spacious accommodations in Denver. Its most important contribution to the rise of craft brewing, however, put homebrewers in touch with beer industry professionals and made it seem feasible to transfer small-batch home systems into commercial enterprises. By picking brains and making personal connections, homebrewers at the GABF learned how to make beer in large batches while maintaining quality and freshness.<sup>27</sup>

To see how this process unfolded, consider the story of the Boulder Beer Company and its founders, Rudolph Ware and David Hummer. Before the 1982 GABF, Ware and Hummer were physics PhDs at the University of Colorado's Joint Institute for Laboratory Astrophysics. Using a hodgepodge of jury-rigged equipment, Ware and Hummer had been experimenting with the recipes they found in *Zymurgy* and with their own homebrewed concoctions. As the story goes, after a particularly raucous faculty party featuring Ware's and Hummer's homebrew, a co-worker asked the pair if there was anything left of the beer. This colleague's desire for more of Ware's and Hummer's uniquely flavorful beer gave the pair the idea to start a brewery. Roping in their friend, an engineer by the name of Al Nelson, the would-be-brewers applied with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms for the forty-third brewery license in the United States. Despite the fact that it was initially housed in a goat shed outside of Hygiene, Colorado,

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<sup>27</sup> Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 92; Callahan, Interview with Brian Callahan of New Belgium Brewery.

the resulting Boulder Brewing Company's Planet Porter would go on to win first place in its category at the 1982 GABF and gain national attention for its flavor and originality. While Ware, Hummer, and Nelson certainly were not the first American homebrewers to make the leap into craft brewing, they were the first to do so in Colorado. More importantly, they were the first craft brewery not located on the West Coast, where craft beer had been thriving since Fritz Maytag began bottling Anchor Steam Beer in 1971.

Though Boulder Beer is now just another of several dozen regional craft breweries, the company's early success proved that craft beer could be profitable in non-West Coast markets. Without the GABF, and by extension Charlie Papazian's AHA, small breweries like Boulder Beer would have had to learn how to brew and bottle beer in large quantities without the help and advice of industry professionals. Boulder Beer's ascent to notoriety and the rapid expansion of its brewing capacity heralded an almost unbelievable proliferation of new breweries that offered thirsty Coloradans a chance to identify with a local product and distinguish themselves as members of what was then an exclusive club. Boulder Beer's success was obviously the result of a variety of factors, but in this case, the factors which made for a successful brewing operation converged at a specific place and time in Western history. In other words, the fact that the Denver-metro area became home to the vanguards of craft brewing was due in part to the area's qualities as a hub of outdoor recreation, and in part to the culture of connoisseurism that Papazian and the AHA helped to launch at the GABF.<sup>28</sup>

As appealing as beer bottled in a goat shed may have been to Colorado beer connoisseurs, some early GABF attendees realized that bottling and distributing beer

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<sup>28</sup> Acitelli, *The Audacity of Hops*, 73; Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 321; Roger Fillion, "Small-Batch Craft Brewer Taps Coors for Tips on Getting Started," *Rocky Mountain News*, May 23, 2008.

were capital-intensive operations that necessitated lots of specialized knowledge. Even with collaboration between brewers flourishing as a result of GABF attendance, some would-be brewers shied away from bottling their beer as they discovered that brewpubs could be another means of getting beer into consumers' hands and stomachs.

Though the nation's first brewpubs opened in the Pacific Northwest and in California in the mid-1980s, it did not take long for Denver and the rest of the Front Range to catch on. Initially, brewpubs were illegal in the state of Colorado under the three-tier system of distribution that outlawed the sale of alcohol on the premises of its production. Permits for establishing these types of breweries "literally took an act of government," but the growing popularity of craft beer combined with the difficulty and expense of lining up distributors willing to take on small volume shipments of bottled craft brew led some enterprising individuals to begin serving it in restaurants.<sup>29</sup>

Wyncoop Brewery in Denver led this charge. In 1988, with \$100,000 from the buyout of his failed oil and gas exploration company in his pocket, John Hickenlooper and three compatriots obtained a further \$475,000 in loans and opened the restaurant and brewery in Denver's LoDo district. According to Hickenlooper, the brewpub's opening night was almost a fiasco as hundreds of thirsty patrons rushed to the bar to buy cups of beer for only 25 cents. The new brewery ran out of beer before eleven o'clock that night, selling over 6,000 plastic cups of fine ales. Following hard on the heels of Wyncoop's success, 42 other brewpubs opened in Colorado in the next five years, notably including

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<sup>29</sup> The three-tier distribution system refers to a legal holdover from post-prohibition era attempts to keep mobsters from controlling alcohol sales. The three-tiers are brewers, distributors, and vendors. No single business or business owner was allowed engage in more than one of the preceding enterprises. Thus, brewpubs were illegal in most states, as the 21<sup>st</sup> amendment delegates the authority to license breweries, distributors, and vendors to state legislatures. See Richard A. Krek, "'The Napa Valley of Beer': Colorado's Brewpub Phenomenon," *Colorado Heritage* Winter (2000).



Boulder's Mountain Sun Pub & Brewery, Fort Collins' Coopersmiths Pub & Brewing, and Breckenridge Brewery. But the transformation of Denver's working-class saloons into upscale brewpubs is indicative of the demographic transformation that began in the late 1960s. In fact, changing attitudes towards alcohol consumption have been good indicators of economic and social change for much of Colorado's history. Taking a brief interlude from the story of Colorado's craft beer industry to examine the state's historical attitudes toward beer drinking and the way advertising shaped consumption reveals that Colorado's craft beer renaissance was a historical reaction to America's post-war consumer culture.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Changing Face of Denver's Beer Drinkers**

Denver's pre-prohibition saloons had a reputation for being dingy and dangerous, and for breeding labor unrest. In part, this reputation was a result of male-dominated saloon culture and stereotypes about saloon patrons. Because early bars were the main point of social contact for miners, loggers, and migrants, and because most alcohol serving establishments were owned by and catered to German, Irish, or Italian immigrants, upper class Denverites avoided the seemingly endless rows of saloons that popped up along Larimer, Market, and Blake streets between 1858 and 1900. In fact, Denver's middle-class social scene was so oriented towards beer-serving saloon culture in 1890 that it supported over 300 saloons, as compared to only 81 churches and 41

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 40; Kimberly Meyer, "Special Report: Brewing up a Storm, Brew Pubs to Tap Area Market," *Rocky Mountain News*, April 5, 1988.

schools. Not only does this figure indicate the popularity of beer as the beverage of the working male, it reveals a major gender imbalance.<sup>31</sup>

Yet as the city entered the twentieth century, Denver's gender distribution had begun to even out. What's more, the end of the Front Range gold rush and the growing importance of the metropolis as a place for families to settle brought in many more white Americans with progressive-era sensibilities. Growing intolerance for migrants combined with a powerful temperance movement in Colorado brought about the end of saloon culture in 1914 when voters backed a statewide initiative to outlaw the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Though Denver's bars would make a small resurgence after 1933, other centers for social gatherings and community building such as movie theaters and museums supplanted the saloon, and all but eliminated the nation's taste for the cheap but flavorful beer migrant saloon owners had served before prohibition.<sup>32</sup>

In this way, what once were once bars where immigrants and laborers would gather to share a few pints became, by the middle of the 1990s, the thriving hub of a new kind of nightlife. Chic taverns like Wyncoop that served unique beers alongside high quality pub food were slowly starting to attract new clientele to beer drinking. But before brewpub entrepreneurs like Hickenlooper could revive and revamp downtown Denver's thriving saloon culture, they would first have to redefine what it meant to be a beer drinker.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas J Noel, *The City and the Saloon Denver, 1858-1916* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1996), 108–109; Krek, ““The Napa Valley of Beer’: Colorado’s Brewpub Phenomenon,” 39.

<sup>32</sup> Noel, *The City and the Saloon Denver, 1858-1916*, 108–109; Krek, ““The Napa Valley of Beer’: Colorado’s Brewpub Phenomenon,” 39.

<sup>33</sup> Krek, ““The Napa Valley of Beer’: Colorado’s Brewpub Phenomenon,” 39.

After brewing beer became legal again, drinking it fell again mostly to men. Throughout the 1950s and 60s beer made a resurgence as the beverage of the working class male. A 1954 survey conducted by the U.S. Brewer's Foundation revealed that two-thirds of all U.S. males drank beer, compared to only twenty two percent of women.<sup>34</sup> Popularized by massive television and print advertising campaigns, large national breweries like Miller, Balentine, and Anheuser-Bush (the makers of Budweiser) campaigned fiercely to, "recast beer as a safe and respectable beverage while erasing pre-prohibition stigmas."<sup>35</sup> The logic behind this move is easy to understand, as memories of prohibition were stuck painfully in the beer industry's collective memory. But what is more difficult to understand is how the industry managed to change Americans' perceptions of the beverage in such a short period of time. An increasingly vibrant body of scholarship has pointed to the power of television and the growing influence of national marketing campaigns directed at women as the driving force behind the resurgence of beer.<sup>36</sup>

If directing marketing campaigns for beer towards women seems counterintuitive to the goal of selling more beer to men, consider for a moment that women were often the driving force behind temperance movements in the early part of the twentieth century. In the minds of nation-wide brewers, the greatest threat to growth in the post-prohibition era would be coming from women. Breweries responded by associating beer with traditional American values of home and independence, and recast beer drinking as central to the

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<sup>34</sup> "Home Beer Drinking Climbing Steadily," *New York Times*, January 3, 1956, 92; Nathan Michael Corzine, "Right at Home: Freedom and Domesticity in the Language and Imagery of Beer Advertising, 1933 - 1960," *Journal of Social History* Summer (2010): 856.

<sup>35</sup> Corzine, "Right at Home: Freedom and Domesticity in the Language and Imagery of Beer Advertising, 1933 - 1960," 859.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 859; Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 140-141.

emerging patriarchal suburban ideal. As post-war consumer culture began to take off, beer advertisements on television and in influential magazines like *Life* almost never deviated from the theme that beer could and should be a part of everyday American life. In short, as the American dream of homeownership became more attainable, brewers recognized an opportunity to position beer as the beverage of domesticity. As scholar Nathan Corzine has pointed out, ads from the 1950s and 60s insisted that “Beer belonged at home – in front of the radio, listening to the football game, in front of the television, during the holidays, when family visited, out in the yard for a BBQ or in the moments after the wedding.”<sup>37</sup> But associating beer with these occasions would require beer

advocates appealing to the usually female family member responsible for managing the family’s grocery budget.<sup>38</sup>

The first step in this process was to instill in American women the notion that beer drinking was a safer alternative to hard liquor because of its lower alcohol content. In its advertisements, the U.S. Brewers’ Association spread the gospel of beer’s relative safety with the tagline



Figure 3: An advertisement from the U.S. Brewers Association casting beer as a safe and wholesome alternative to spirits

<sup>37</sup> Corzine, “Right at Home: Freedom and Domesticity in the Language and Imagery of Beer Advertising, 1933 - 1960,” 855.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 855-856.

“America’s Beverage of Moderation.” The central message of these ads was that moderate consumption of alcohol in the home was preferable to excessive consumption in taverns, and that men who drank in bars were not being served properly by attentive and loving wives. Pressured into purchasing beer and keeping the home well stocked with mass produced lagers, middle-class American women became trapped by the moral expectations of husbands and neighbors created, in part, by increasingly prevalent beer advertisements. Though woman also drank beer, particularly in the late 1970s when large brewers dialed back on the flavor to appeal to a wider audience, men were the primary consumers of beer and remain so today by nearly a 30% margin.<sup>39</sup>

National brands and beer industry associations were not the only companies trading on the power of consumer culture and mass marketing to sell suds. Regional breweries like Coors ratcheted up their marketing campaigns during the 1970s to reach out to the ever-more economically powerful middle class. Coors, seizing on the mystique the brand generated by distributing in just a few western states, began running advertising campaigns that would associate its beer with its brewery’s mountain backdrop. Iconic images of cowboys and mountains adorned the company’s ads, while the company’s president, who insisted on being called “Bill” wore jeans and cowboy boots to board meetings. Together with the company’s fabled use of what it insisted was pure Colorado

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<sup>39</sup> Corzine, “Right at Home: Freedom and Domesticity in the Language and Imagery of Beer Advertising, 1933 - 1960,” 855; The Beverage Information Group, *2009 Beer Handbook: The Ultimate Data Resource on the Malt Beverage Industry*, 172-175; image: “An Evening of Bowling,” USBA Ad, 1949, <http://www.gono.com/beermagazineads/beerbottler/b26.jpg>.

mountain runoff and its cold filtering process, Coors became the favorite of young, affluent beer drinkers looking to thumb their nose at larger breweries.<sup>40</sup>

This strategy paid off for Coors. Between 1965 and 1970, Coors' rocky mountain mystique propelled the brewery from twelfth to fourth-largest brewery in America. College students from east coast schools were dispatched to Colorado to purchase and then smuggle back carloads of the unattainable ale. Even president Gerald Ford was drinking Coors beer, having requested that it be flown in to Washington. By early 1980s, however, Coors could no longer claim to be a challenger to the beer establishment, and the brand's appeal to young affluent beer drinkers began to wane. This decline in appeal was partly driven by a growing demand for imported European lagers, and partly due to the growth in the domestic production of local craft beers.

Despite emerging snobbery surrounding the issue of craft ales as an alternative to Coors, Colorado craft brewers owe the Golden-based company – and indeed all national brewers - a debt of gratitude. National brands laid the groundwork for the resurgent popularity of beer in America after prohibition, and Coors's marketing campaigns were the first to associate beer drinking with Colorado's rugged landscape and a life spent outside. Though Coors's advertisements targeted a different audience than craft brewers would tap into decades later, the connection between beer marketing and Colorado's terrain began with Coors' insistence on the purity of Colorado's natural environment.<sup>41</sup>

## **Marketing Craft Beer to People Who Played Outside**

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<sup>40</sup> Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 273–274; Dan Baum, *Citizen Coors: A Grand Family Saga of Business, Politics, and Beer* (New York: Perennial/Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Ogle, *Ambitious Brew*, 274.

The same purity, ruggedness, and beauty that helped propel Coors' brand was also precisely what drew Kim Jordan and Jeff Lebesch to Colorado. Young transplants from Maryland and Wisconsin respectively, the couple moved to Colorado because of the quality of life the state's Front Range communities offered to those who enjoy hiking, biking, skiing, and other outdoor pursuits. Of course, Jordan and Lebesch were not alone in recognizing the recreational benefits of Colorado's landscape. According to research conducted by Walter E. Hecox at Colorado College, the Rocky Mountain region – the part of the country running along the spine of the Rockies from Idaho to New Mexico – experienced a massive spurt of growth of about 122% in the years between 1970 and 2010. Tellingly, data for those same years suggests that the Rocky Mountain region attracted a higher percentage of white, college educated, professionals to high-paying jobs than any other part of the interior West. A correlation between this phenomenon and an explosion of jobs and money in the outdoor recreation sector suggests that, by and large, people moving to Colorado in the last years of the twentieth century were doing so out of what Bill Travis has characterized as, “the desire to live in the nation's fastest growing cities, towns, and rural areas, all set in a dramatic landscape of mountains, deserts, and canyons.”<sup>42</sup>

As Travis also points out, these immigrants needed to be able to find work, preferably in high-paying jobs in fields that allowed them to apply their hard earned degrees. At the same time, firms that could locate wherever they wished were driving

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<sup>42</sup> Travis, *New Geographies of the American West: Land Use and the Changing Patterns of Place*, 2; Callahan, Interview with Brian Callahan of New Belgium Brewery; Dimantchev, “Overview Section: Recreation Nature Based Recreation in the Rockies: The New Value of the Region's Resources,” 94; Walter Hecox, “Overview Section: The Rockies Region A Region Continually Defined and Redefined by Resources and Environment,” Colorado College State of the Rockies Report Card (Colorado Springs: Colorado College, 2011), 14. See Appendix A.

Colorado's "postextractive and postindustrial economy."<sup>43</sup> Technological innovations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century liberated corporations from the constraints imposed by the need to locate in proximity to major infrastructure like seaports or natural resources like coal seams. As a result, increasingly important tech sector corporations like computer software and hardware giants Storage Technology Corporation, IBM, and Ball Aerospace opened or expanded offices on the Front Range. The thing that these companies all realized was that their offices' location could play a major role in attracting in highly qualified employees because, as Thomas Michael Power has pointed out, "People care where they live and, given the choice, gravitate toward more desirable residential areas. They want high quality of life, including access to the West's natural landscapes and ecosystems. Economic activity tends to follow them. Environmental quality has become a central element of local economic bases and a central determinant of local economic vitality."<sup>44</sup>

Jordan and Lebesch were both a part of this influx of a new kind of westerner, and their unique Belgian-style ales struck a chord among similarly-minded outdoor-oriented craft beer drinkers. Papazian and Matzen had laid the groundwork for homebrewers to make the leap into commercial craft brewing with *Zymurgy* and the GABF, and because drinking beer outside was already a well-established pastime in the early 1990s, it made perfect sense for Jordan and Lebesch to market their beer towards like-minded connoisseurs.

In 1991, New Belgium Brewing launched Fat Tire, an American amber ale brewed with Belgian yeast to give it an aroma and flavor unlike anything most craft beer

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<sup>43</sup> Travis, *New Geographies of the American West: Land Use and the Changing Patterns of Place*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Michael Power, *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies: The Search For A Value Of Place* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1996), 237 in Travis, *New Geographies of the American West*, 27.



drinkers had ever experienced. Because it was so unique, beer drinkers quickly adopted the ale as a favorite post-outdoor excursion libation. But the ale's name – a reference to the large knobby tires Lebesh installed on his mountain bike for the trip through Belgium that inspired the ale – indicates a desire to connect with consumers on a deeper level than taste. For Lebesh and Jordan, bicycling was an integral part of their life, and they knew that they had good company as mountain biking was rapidly becoming a favorite Colorado pastime. By branding New Belgium as the unofficial brewery of the Fort Collins bicycling community, Jordan and Lebesh tapped into seemingly bottomless demand for a beverage that would identify the drinker as a discerning consumer and a person with the means to live an outdoor recreational lifestyle.<sup>45</sup>

Over the next decade, several more breweries opened and began marketing their beer to outdoor enthusiasts. Notable among these breweries was Oskar Blues of Lyons, Colorado, whose canned ales defied the prevailing wisdom that good beer had to come in a glass bottle. But the marketing department at Oskar Blues cared less about conventional wisdom than about giving consumers the option of bringing good craft beer along on raft trips where glass bottles were a liability, or were simply not allowed by state and federal regulations.<sup>46</sup> That every can of Oskar Blues' Dale's Pale Ale is inscribed with the backpacker's motto "pack it in, pack it out" testifies to the brewery's commitment to making good beer for people who want to enjoy it outside.

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<sup>45</sup> Callahan, Interview with Brian Callahan of New Belgium Brewery; Dimantchev, "Overview Section: Recreation Nature Based Recreation in the Rockies: The New Value of the Region's Resources." See Appendix A.

<sup>46</sup> Callahan, Interview with Brian Callahan of New Belgium Brewery.

**Conclusion:**

As a way to track connections between craft brewing and outdoor recreation in Colorado, the humble beer can actually works pretty well. Initially, canned beer carried the stigma of mass production. To the craft or homebrew consuming elite, those drinking canned beer in the 1980s and 90s were not a part of the club. By consuming beer in a can, drinkers were identifying themselves as part of the mainstream, corporate beer brewing apparatus. Rejecting this identity, craft beer brewers and drinkers built cachet as they sipped brews from glass bottles or from pint glasses in brewpubs. As a way of demonstrating to others that they were part of an exclusive group, purchasing, tasting, and talking about craft beer were the markers of a new, intellectual class of beer drinker who cared about flavor and could afford to buy the good stuff.

As time went on and associations between craft beer drinking and outdoor recreation solidified, consumers gradually began to realize the same thing Charlie Papazian discovered in 1979: that a long day of hiking or rafting is made infinitely better when it ends with a delicious beer. But unlike the Papazian of 1979, for whom taking canned beer in the backcountry meant sacrificing flavor, discerning backpackers twenty-five years later would have a kaleidoscopic array of canned craft brewed options to sip on the river or enjoy in a hot spring. That New Belgium Brewery sees a significant uptick in canned beer sales during the summer months testifies to the demand for craft beer among outdoor-oriented beer drinkers, and to the ongoing role Colorado's physical geography plays in shaping the craft beer industry.

From the earliest of Papazian's illegal homebrewing classes to the huge "Tour de Fat" festivals New Belgium now puts on to promote bike culture around the country,

craft beer has long been connected to outdoor recreation. But this connection reveals much more about the American West than scholars have realized. In the minds of those who cared about such things, being a beer connoisseur was a way of marking class and identity. In a region that is continuously attracting new people and is undergoing a significant demographic shift, drinking craft beer has become a method of defining what it means to live an outdoor recreational lifestyle. Ending mountain bike rides or days of backcountry skiing at a brewpub has become more than a pleasant way to wind down. It is now a marker of class and cultural capital. With craft brewers striving to create ever more interesting and innovative offerings, they are competing for the attention of New Westerners who are well-versed in beer and have the means required to drink expensive beer and engage in expensive hobbies.

Looking back on Colorado's beer boom from this angle, it is easy to see the association between craft brewing and playing outside has deep economic and cultural roots, and those roots are planted firmly on the Front Range. Denver's history as saloon town and as host to the nearby Coors Brewing Company has made Denver a regional hub of beer consumption since before prohibition. In the twenty-first century, Denver's location has given the city and its suburbs a unique geographical advantage that helped precipitate a unique confluence of money, amenity, and brewing knowledge. While other locations may have had more homebrewing clubs or more breweries per-capita, the fact remains that American craft brewing came of age thanks to the dedication of people like Charlie Papazian, Kim Jordan, and Jeff Lebesch, all of whom were drawn to Colorado's budding outdoor lifestyle.

While Colorado cannot claim credit for being the first state to have craft beer, nor the title of cradle of American homebrewing, it continues to drive innovation in craft brewing and to set the tone for what it means to be a beer connoisseur. Thanks to pioneers like Papazian and Matzen, and the ongoing influx of wealthy amenity-seekers, the Front Range is still the best place in the country to get a cold one.

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