

Behind the Bar

Jeremy Cowan of Shmaltz Brewing Company Talks Geektobberfest, Jewish Celebration & How Sour is the New Bitter

By [Chantal Martineau](#), Fri., Oct. 1 2010 @ 10:55AM



Jeremy Cowan started [Shmaltz Brewing Company](#) back in 1996 out of his San Francisco apartment. Now, the beer is brewed in upstate New York and includes the line of HE'BREW craft kosher beers and Coney Island Craft Lagers. Cowan is busy this week as [NYC Craft Beer Week](#) is in full swing. He tells us where you can find him and his beers now through October 3.

This is a big week for you guys. What should we be looking out for at NYC Craft Beer Week?

We hosted the kick-off party called Freaktoberfest -- it was our third annual -- which showcases all of our favorite and what we think are some of the best craft beers from around the country with performers: bands from New York and the Freakshow performers from Coney Island, doing burlesque acts, juggling, sword swallowing, and hammering nails to their face. It was a huge hit and we are off and running with New York Craft Beer Week with events that feature the official beer we put together as a project called Geektobberfest. Geektobberfest is definitely not a traditional Oktoberfest beer. It's specifically intended to shatter any expectations of anything to do with what I find to be a somewhat less interesting beer style than most of the other great craft beers that are going on right now.

Wow. Sounds intriguing.

Geektobberfest is a blend of seven different craft beers brewed at our facility from Shmaltz Brewing Company, Ithaca Beer Company, and Captain Lawrence. The beer itself is a ridiculous, delicious project I've been calling the absolutely most expensive kitchen sink beer ever produced. The Captain Lawrence beer is a sour brown in a traditional Belgian or boutique European style that was aged in port barrels for over two years. The beer from Ithaca is their nut brown ale that's been aged in barrels that were previously used for Sam Adams Utopias, as well as Buffalo Trace bourbon. And the beers from Shmaltz Brewing Company are our Jewbelation series, which is our high-octane anniversary seasonals. We blended four different years Jewbelation, as well as Rejewvenator: our harvest seasonal. It's a big, strong brown ale brewed with grape juice this year. And finally, in honor of the Circus Sideshow at Freaktoberfest, we put in a healthy serving of the Human Blockhead, which is our imperial European lager aged in Sazerac six-year rye whiskey barrels. The beer is featured all week long at [Blind Tiger](#), [4th Avenue Pub](#), and [The Gate](#). It should make an appearance at [Spuyten Duyvil](#) and [Barcade](#).

Are collaborations between breweries common?

Collaborations have become a much more prevalent part of experimenting to make unique beers and to have a bunch of fun. Basically, we have not done as many collaborations ourselves because I don't own the brewery, but there have been some really fantastic examples of collaborations from West Coast-East Coast or American and European breweries. This was a chance for us to feature some very unique beers from three outstanding breweries in New York State that are creating a real reputation for themselves in New York City. It's been a really exciting project and I think it's been a very successful blend. The beer itself is spectacular.

What can you tell me about aged beers? Is it a major trend of the moment?

It's a big point of enthusiasm and experimentation. It's still a tiny slice of the beer market, but what's happening in craft beer is that the overall market is growing. People are looking for more flavorful, if not exceptional craft beers from small producers. It's not just a fad. It's clearly the market shifting in that direction as the biggest beer companies in the country have a harder and

harder time selling their products just based on marketing and advertising. Craft brewers sell these unique and innovative products based on passion and artistic sensibility. Barrel-aged beers and aged beers are the fringe of craft beer, but that's where the excitement is, much like craft beer is the excitement in the overall industry in the United States. Barrel-aged beers, alternative yeast strains, beers aged on different things, whether it's fresh cherries or maple syrup or oak chips. That's where the excitement is in craft beer, where the experimentation and passion is happening.

I recently heard someone say that sour is the new bitter.

That's awesome. Somebody's got to have that as their bumper sticker. It's not that sour is the new bitter. IPAs are still the fastest growing category in the country now that the hop crisis is seeming to pass, hoppy beers are back in full force. But sour beers are starting to take hold in a way that really hoppy beers or even just extreme beers started being prevalent at the best beer bars on a consistent basis. I think in the next several years, just about every small craft brewery is going to be featuring something that will be, if not specifically sour, at least containing some of the elements of those types of beers.

Are there any trends or phenomena in the beer world that you're sick of seeing at this point?

No, other than chasing the mediocrity of the biggest beers in the country. It's one thing I understand when brewpubs feel like they need to have a light color session beer for some of their customers, why serve them someone else's light beer? Obviously, craft brewers know how to make pale golden ales that can be even more complex and delicious, but there's been a bit of a backlash within this tiny little group that we call the craft beer community against extreme beer for people who want to see more session ales and low-alcohol beers. Yet, all of us who've finally scraped together a living and are just on the cusp of affording health insurance for ourselves for the first time in our careers have built our companies based on innovation. Even my company, we put out a pilsner this year for the first time, which I vowed never to do. I think that the style has been so perverted that everybody calls whatever they're making a pilsner and it generally is their least interesting product, so we tried to do what I hoped was an interesting take on a pretty stale style.

So, no regrets on making a pilsner?

The fact is that nine out of 10 beers drunk in this country are big beer companies selling the same yellow, forgettable styles. So, if people want to chip away at that I think it's great for this country. It's great for small business. For beer that really doesn't cost that much more and certainly doesn't have the price tag of fine wine or fine boutique spirits, you can afford the absolute best, most insane beers in the world that have taken an incredible amount of artistry to conceive of and to execute.

Do you do any of the brewing yourself?

No, I work with a head brewer, Paul McErlean, up in Saratoga. He and I create the idea. I tell him what I want and he translates it into something that the brewing staff produces for us. They do 15 different beer styles several times a year. We have a young gentleman who does our special brewing projects, like blending barrel-aged beers. I basically list what I want for the beer and he pulls it all together.

How did you initially get into beer?

When I started Shmaltz, it was really just an experiment. I just thought it would be fun and funny to make this country's first and only Jewish celebration beer. And so, I went to a small brewery in Northern California and did exactly what I do now, which is say, "Hey I have an idea for a project and I'm wondering if you could help me." And we brewed 100 cases of Genesis ale, our flagship for Hanukkah 1996. It was all hand bottled and hand labeled, and I delivered it around Northern California to a handful of retail stores myself. Now, 14 years later, we're distributed in about 30 states. We probably have about 3,000 retailers around the country.

Do make a big marketing push for Jewish holidays?

It's at Jewish delis and it's at punk rock dive bars. I think we try to spread it around to a little bit of everybody who might like better beer and appreciate the shtick.

What's your most unusual beer?

Geektoberfest is definitely the most unusual as it's blended with other breweries. We just came out with one that won an award at the largest beer festival in the country: the Great American Beer Festival. We make a beer called R.I.P.A. on Rye, a rye-based version of our bittersweet Lenny's R.I.P.A. double IPA. We age that in Sazerac six-year barrels. We did our first bottling in the spring and we're just now releasing our second batch in the next couple of weeks.

What do you drink at home?

Lots of different things. Since I own a beer company, I'm mostly out drinking. I don't drink nearly as much at home as I do for work and for fun with friends at some of our favorite beer bars around the country and around New York City. When I'm just having a quiet moment on my own, I really like stronger ales and some of our stronger lagers. They have just a flavor and richness, a lushness whether it's double IPAs or we have a giant brown ale we make every year called Jewbelation. Beers in the category that are not very predictable and utterly delicious, usually a little bit higher alcohol, but smaller servings so that's it's really quality, not quantity.

What are some of your favorite bars in the city?

That's kind of unfair since we have so many friends at so many bars. I always enjoy Spuyten Duyvil in Williamsburg. It's a fantastic environment and an incredible esoterically curated beer selection that I really appreciate. I've also been going to 4th Avenue Pub a lot. They've been awesome for us. For more like neighborhood hangouts: [Franklin Park](#) over in Prospect Heights, as well as [Kettle of Fish](#). My art director is from Milwaukee and has been watching Packers games at Kettle of Fish for over a decade. For the Coney Island beers, having them at the Freakshow at Coney Island out at the beach has been an incredible project and they're probably our number one account in the city.

You have a book coming out?

It's called *Craft Beer Bar Mitzvah*. It's kind of a small business memoir of 13 years of Shmaltz Brewing Company.

Are there any events coming up that you'd like to recommend?

Sunday we're at [Eleven Madison Park](#) for the Craft Beer Week wrap up. Sunday night we're doing a beer and pizza pairing at [L'asso](#) and Heather Holliday (sword swallower) and Donny Vomit (human blockhead) from the Sideshow are going to be performing.

Is there anything else you'd like to mention coming up after Craft Beer Week?

The last thing we're going to be doing this year is launching a Jewbelation project, which is three different versions of our holiday seasonal. It'll be our 14th anniversary beer brewed with 14 malts, 14 hops and 14 percent alcohol. A gift pack with eight different versions of that beer, as well as Hanukkah candles and instructions on how to create your own beer menorah. It should be really fun. And a barrel-aged version of all of those blended together called Vertical Jewbelation. All of those start coming out next week.