

# AUSSIES TAKING OFF

*Here in Australia, we're loving our craft beer more than ever, but how do our brews rate overseas? As it turns out, we're making a few waves.*

WORDS JAMES SMITH

There can be little doubt that the Australian craft beer industry is in rude health. While it makes up less than three per cent of total beer sales in Australia right now, even including the craft beer arms of the major multinational breweries, growth in recent years has been unprecedented.

Whether measured by market share, the number of new breweries, the prevalence of craft beer in bars, bottle stores and restaurants, or the rapid growth of festivals dedicated to beer, the picture is rosy.

Furthermore, the Australian beer industry is starting to have an impact overseas. A handful of local breweries have picked up major international trophies, some are sending their beer to Asia, Europe and the US, a number has taken part in collaborative brews with overseas counterparts, while the new wave of Australian hops being developed is causing much excitement among brewers across the globe.

But given the revolution in craft beer is a global affair – one sparked by a scene in the US that is 30 years old – is this extraordinary? Or, with local consumers taking so long to wake up to better beer, are we still playing catch up?

“I think we're ahead of where most people think,” says Brad Rogers, co-owner and head brewer at Byron Bay's fast-growing Stone & Wood. “People say we are 10 years behind the US – we're not. In terms of the growth of the craft beer industry around the world, Australia and New Zealand punch well above their weight.”

“It's just phenomenal and it's not just us at Stone & Wood – it's the entire industry. [Craft beer] is at two-plus per cent [of the overall Australian market] now and we want to be at five per cent in just a few years.”

Stone & Wood's Pacific Ale was one of a handful of Australian beers to pick up medals at the prestigious World Beer Cup in San Diego last year, alongside Sydney's Redoak and Burleigh Brewing from the Gold Coast, which won gold in a category traditionally dominated by German breweries. Elsewhere, there have been trophies for the likes of Feral Brewing, whose head brewer Brendan Varis was invited to the UK for a second time this year to brew a British version of his successful Hop Hog for a national beer festival.

Brewers across Australia have been welcoming some of the biggest names in the beer world into their brewhouses to create collaborative beers, then travelling to the US, Europe and the UK to return the favour. International brewers have also been heading here with greater regularity in the past couple of years, partly to attend festivals, but also in acknowledgement of the rapid growth in interest in craft beer. Meanwhile, a trip to the UK last year highlighted how popular Australian hops are proving for brewers seeking new flavour and aroma experiences.

“Hop wise, Galaxy has forged itself a bit of a reputation, both in the UK and the US,” says Feral's Brendan Varis. “Banks, where I was brewing, had a Galaxy Mild as part of their Brewer Series and it was the most well-received beer ever from their hop series. There is recognition of Australian hops now, whereas three years ago there was none.”

Brendan says Feral is experiencing growing demand from the Asian market, but says any inroads that Australian breweries are making overseas are understandably limited. The challenges faced by Australian brewers in meeting the home-grown demand means there is little need or desire to seek out new markets.

“You need to remember that it's only a young industry,” Brendan says. “Pretty much every single brewery in Australia is at capacity supplying its own market. There is an insatiable appetite for craft beer in Australia at the moment.”



IN TERMS OF THE GROWTH OF THE CRAFT BEER INDUSTRY AROUND THE WORLD, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND PUNCH WELL ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT.

BRAD ROGERS  
HEAD BREWER / STONE & WOOD



So, what do those who have visited Australia in recent times make of our burgeoning craft beer scene? Kjetil Jikiun – the founder of Norway's Nøgne Ø, who was a guest at last year's Good Beer Week and has brewed a number of beers with Beechworth's Bridge Road Brewers – would like to see more adventure.

“I was surprised at how subtle most beers were,” he says. “Almost as if most brewers were afraid of going in their own direction and using capital letters when required. [In my experience] there is an increasing focus on Australian hops, but not much focus on Australian beers [internationally]. Maybe it would be easier to get noticed with more assertive flavours and a more Australian identity [through the use of Australian ingredients].”

For Eric Ottaway, general manager of Brooklyn Brewery in the US, which has made great strides since entering the Australian market, his first experience of Australian beer was Coopers, ➔

PICTURED  
(above)  
Craft breweries are busy supplying the local – and increasingly, international – markets; there is an ever-growing range of craft beers.

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**BRENDAN VARIS / BREWER, FERAL BREWING**



imported into the US in the 1990s. “I had no idea quite how far the Australian beer scene had come, so I was pleasantly surprised by what I found,” he says of his visit to Melbourne last May. “As with any nascent craft beer scene, there is of course some variety in the quality of the offerings, but on the whole I was quite impressed. In particular, I liked the use of local ingredients in many of the beers I tasted.

“Twenty per cent of our sales are to the export market, so we’ve become pretty good at understanding when it’s too early and when conditions are right. We sometimes do get a little ahead of the market, but in the case of Australia I think we were right on the money.”

Closer to home, there is growing traffic in beer heading across the Tasman. Anyone who has spent time exploring New Zealand’s craft brewing scene will be aware just how vibrant it is. In fact, it was hard not to conclude from last year’s Beervana Festival, and a tour of some of Wellington’s finer beer venues, that our neighbours boast even greater strength in depth.

Dominic Kelly, owner of Wellington’s beer bar Hashigo Zake, believes it is hard to compare the two markets, but cites beers from the likes of Feral, Murray’s, Bridge Road, Mountain Goat, Lobethal, Hargreaves Hill, Moo Brew and others as indicative of Australia’s brewing quality.

“I think the reality is that, as in many other fields, New Zealand’s and Australia’s craft brewing industries have more similarities than differences,” he says. “Both countries have shifted in a generation from looking to traditional European styles and practices to being firmly in the ‘modern, new world craft’ camp – borrowing attitudes, business models, recipes and hops from North America.

“Both countries have the luxury of a local hop industry to inspire brewers, cultivate a little parochialism and give local beers flavours that differ from imported ones. And craft brewers in both countries have to work around a hospitality industry that is effectively hostile thanks to the anti-competitive practices of the industrial breweries.

“Looking at some of the North American and European imports we now see in Australasia can be daunting. But it’s also unfair to compare our output to them since those imports are from the elite tier of a much bigger, more mature and infinitely better funded industry.”

Dominic says such imports act as a “sobering reminder” that for all the progress made and the “phenomenal” growth described by Brad Rogers, there is still a long way to go. But, as he concludes, this is actually a good thing.

*James Smith is the creator of The Crafty Pint – craftypint.com – a guide to Australian craft beer.*

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## BEERS TO TRY



### FERAL WHITE HOG

To mark 10 years of brewing, Feral created a blend of their first release, the White Ale, and their flagship Hop Hog. Brewer Brendan Varis reckons it’s the best beer he brewed in 2012. / 5.8%



### MOUNTAIN GOAT IPA

Sold in the US as Australian Pale Ale, this fantastically hoppy, previously irregular release from the Melbourne brewers is so popular it has become their third bottle release. / 6.2%



### HOLGATE BREWERY MT MACEDON ALE

Woodend’s Holgate now has a base in Sweden and recently celebrated their 1000th brew. The latest version of their original pale ale is superb. A great intro to craft beer. / 4.5%



### BURLEIGH BREWING HEF

This Gold Coast brewery stunned everyone when their German-style hefeweizens won Gold at the 2012 World Beer Cup in San Diego, the world’s biggest beer competition. / 5% alc.



### STONE & WOOD PACIFIC ALE

Byron Bay’s Stone & Wood took their Pacific Ale to the UK last year, dazzling people with their beer created to encapsulate life on the northern NSW coast. / 4.4% alc.