

THE NEW WAVE

A new generation of craft brewers is helping to push the creative boundaries and are producing increasingly exciting beers.

WORDS JAMES SMITH

A couple of years ago, I had a habit of boring anyone with the misfortune to be in earshot with my theory that Australia needed a brewer to come along and shake things up. I wanted them to say, “Sod tradition!” and announce themselves to the world with nothing less than a high-alcohol, hop-bomb of a beer. No more playing it safe with an approachable lager-like ale, pale ale or a wheat beer before introducing something experimental – someone needed to take a step into the unknown.

Around that time, I spotted a business card on the counter of a Melbourne bottle shop bearing the name Moon Dog. The shop’s owner didn’t know a great deal about them, other than that they were local and planned to start brewing in the near future. I pilfered the card, called their number and discovered my theory was about to be tested.

“There were a lot of people who questioned the viability of the business model and whether or not there was a sufficient market for beers that were a bit different,” says Moon Dog co-founder Josh Uljans two years on. “Yet we persevered and to some extent we did change the market a little bit and show there were people out there looking for something to challenge them and excite them.

“We’ve seen more imports coming in that occupy that same kind of space – like Mikkeller and Nøgne Ø. And there’s been a bunch of examples of guys who are starting up [in Australia] with a focus on producing some unique beers, eschewing the traditional styles.”

With brother Jake Uljans and friend Karl van Buuren, Josh announced Moon Dog to the world with initial releases that included a barrel-aged wild ale featuring black cherries called Perverse Sexual Amalgam, a cognac barrel-aged double IPA (India Pale Ale) called Skunkworks and another hybrid with the snappy title Henry Ford’s Girthsome Fjord. All came bearing madcap labels featuring equally off-the-wall descriptions and ingredient lists the length of novellas.

Almost every release has been met with a love-it-or-hate-it response, yet all sell out and are in demand from coast to coast. And while Jake continues to work full-time as a lawyer and the other two continue in their previous jobs on a part-time basis, the brewery – located midway between Carlton & United Breweries and a brothel – was soon paying for itself. It has allowed the trio to begin planning for an imminent tripling in capacity.

Their success is as bold a sign as any of the changing beer market in Australia. While the craft beer sector remains at no more than three per cent – even including Lion-owned Little Creatures, Malt Shovel (producer of James Squire beers), and CUB’s Matilda Bay – it’s evolving at a rate of knots. Other young brewing teams are following a similar model to Moon Dog, with entire events based around the creation of new beers. There are very few among even the oldest established brewers in Australia who have refrained from pushing the button marked “Experiment”. It seems fair to say the Australian craft beer industry has ➔



PICTURED

(above)
Josh Uljans from
Moon Dog and
their beer that has
turned a few heads
– Perverse Sexual
Amalgam.



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JOSH ULJANS
MOON DOG CO-FOUNDER



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NEW PLAYERS TO SEEK OUT

MOON DOG BREWING

You'd call them the elder statesmen of the new wave if only they weren't so childish.
www.moondogbrewing.com.au

DOCTOR'S ORDERS BREWING

Kiwi home-brewer Darren Robinson uses breweries local to his NSW home to produce a handful of beers a year; one this year featured squid ink.
www.doctorsorders.com

RIVERSIDE BREWING

I'm yet to hear anything other than hearty praise for the beers emanating from Parramatta's first craft brewery.
www.riversidebrewing.com.au

NOISY MINOR

At the time of filing this story, this "extreme" arm of new Brisbane micro Fortitude was yet to release a beer, but given the head brewer was at Murray's before moving north, expect great things.
 (No website as yet)

GRIFTER BREWING COMPANY

Skateboards, a solitary steel tank and fun beers from the Sydney trio.
facebook.com/TheGrifterBrewingCompany

THERE'S A MUCH BIGGER DEMAND FOR BEERS THAT ARE DIFFERENT... IF WE TRIED IT 10 YEARS AGO, PEOPLE WOULD HAVE GIVEN IT A WIDE BERTH.

DOUG BREMNER 7 CENT CO-FOUNDER

entered a new wave, with Moon Dog and their ilk heralding a third generation of craft brewers.

First were the pioneers, such as Phil Sexton and his team who started brewing at Fremantle's Sail & Anchor before launching the original Matilda Bay. Of those breweries from the 1980s, few survived, with Sydney's Lord Nelson Hotel & Brewery and Grand Ridge in Mirboo North notable exceptions. The second generation makes up the bulk of those established today: the breweries found in wine regions, tourist spots and major cities, often inspired by beers tasted and pubs visited in the UK, Europe and the US, and whose owners, aided by a huge amount of patience and perseverance, slowly introduced the concept of craft beer to the country.

Now, with a small but established and growing audience of knowledgeable, adventurous beer drinkers, there are brewers happy to head straight to third base with their first beer. Among them are the three young engineer mates behind Victoria's 7 Cent Brewery. Their first three releases are a nine per cent Belgian dark ale, a full-bodied ESB (Extra Special Bitter) and a seven per cent IPA, with plans for a spiced Japanese Ale also in the pipeline.

"There's a much bigger demand for beers that are different as well as more people looking for craft beer," says 7 Cent co-founder Doug Bremner. "Those drinkers allow us to do these crazy beers. If we tried it 10 years ago people would have gone given it a wide berth."

Like Moon Dog, the 7 Cent team, who began brewing together at university, scraped together what little cash they could and built their brewery from water storage tanks and dairy vats – some found on eBay. The total cost of their brewery is just \$13,000, with a rather unique set-up in which their mash tun also acts as their fermenter, meaning they are limited to one brew at a time.

They are not the only new brewers on the scene looking for innovative ways to get a foothold in the market. While some contract their brewing to an existing brewery or "gypsy" brew wherever they can find someone with the spare capacity, others are buying fermenters and putting them into existing breweries so they don't have to use their host's tanks. Among these is Sydney-based Grifter.

Formed by three mates in their mid-20s, they brew at Newtown's Young Henry's. They came to the attention of its founder Richard Adamson after brewing a Christmas Ale for the skateboard company that one of them runs. After testing the market with a relatively straightforward pale ale (that they touted around venues door-to-door in two-litre growlers), they have added a Belgian Red IPA and Kiwi Saison to their line-up.

"I'm from New Zealand and have been here since 2005," says Grifter's Glenn Wignall. "When I first arrived, I went to check out all the beers in the bottle shops and there was hardly anything. Now it's all changed and you can get away with a lot more."

It would be remiss to pretend that only these newer brewers are pushing the boundaries of beer's brave new world. After all, when the Sail & Anchor tapped its first beers, they were unlike anything pouring in its homestate of Western Australia; Mountain Goat's Hightail – now a staple – was radical in 1997; beers from the likes of Swan Valley's Feral, Beechworth's Bridge Road or Port Stephens' Murray's frequently explore new ground with startling results.

Yet it does feel as if there has been a recent unshackling of craft beer's short-lived traditions, allowing new brewers, such as Doctor's Orders, Wayward Brewing and Riverside, to enter the market in the knowledge that pretty much anything goes with some beer lovers right now. In fact, it can be a challenge to come up with something truly new, says Moon Dog's Josh Uljans. "The creative space is much more competitive," he says. "It's not about replicating style. You can make whatever you want. As long as it's delicious." 🍺