



BIG THINGS BREWING

Aussie beer has come a hell of a long way from just a few lagers on tap. We now have a style to make even the most beer-shy think again, but it wasn't always this way. Fortunately, things are only getting better.

WORDS JAMES SMITH

falling sales. Takeover bids. The lowest level of consumption in decades. Take your pick of any number of recent gloomy headlines and you could be forgiven for thinking the Australian beer industry is in terrible health. But while many of the biggest brands are struggling, the argument can be made for Australia's beer scene being one of the most exciting in the world.

Well over 100 microbreweries dot the landscape from coast to coast with more opening every month. Similarly, specialty beer bars and bottle shops are on the rise – some offering as many as 1000 different varieties from all over the world. And more and more drinkers, often young and frequently female, are hunting down beers with names such as Beelzebub's Jewels and Karma Citra, some in styles that blend brewing traditions from several cultures and defy categorisation, and many that command price tags of \$30 and upwards.

For now, what is being termed craft beer still only accounts for around two per cent of the Australian beer market, even including the James Squire and Matilda Bay ranges owned by Lion and Carlton & United Breweries (CUB) respectively. Yet its growth in the past two years has been remarkable; scores of small breweries have expanded, upgraded or taken on additional brewers.

To newcomers, it might sound like an overnight success story. But, like so many overnight successes, it's one almost 30 years in the making. A long, hard slog and false starts can be traced back to a young brewer disillusioned with life at Western Australia's Swan Brewery. That brewer was Phil Sexton, more recently associated with the Giant Steps and Innocent Bystander winery in the Yarra Valley.

But back then, he was not long returned from studying brewing in the UK,

where he worked at a number of traditional breweries. "What was going on in Europe was the opposite of the Australian brewing industry, which was a commodity-driven process – an engineering exercise," he says. "I couldn't reconcile why we wanted to keep doing what we were doing rather than become more interested in the craft of beer. I was banging heads with them and decided there was no future for me. There were no other interesting breweries around, except Coopers in Adelaide, but even they weren't regarded as craft – just different."

So, along with a couple of friends, he cobbled together the funds and equipment and set about creating a brewery against a backdrop of venues that wouldn't take his beer, major breweries that destroyed old equipment to prevent it being snapped up by anyone else, suppliers that refused to sell him raw materials and banks that wouldn't touch his idea.

The result was the Sail & Anchor in Fremantle, a pub that poured three of its own beers, sold imports from overseas and interstate, and was clean and welcoming to women – all elements unheard of in WA's "blokey" bars. It



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PICTURED RIGHT
(from top)
Increasing styles of innovative brews are turning up in venues around the country.



“WE SAID WE’D DO THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT THE BIG BREWERIES AND BARS DO ... SOON WE COULDN’T KEEP UP WITH DEMAND...”

PHIL SEXTON, FOUNDER, MATILDA BAY BREWING COMPANY



PICTURED
(clockwise from top)
Phil Sexton, now with his own wineries, Giant Steps and Innocent Bystander; a happy crowd at Little Creatures in Fremantle; The Sail & Anchor – where it all started.

they could get hold of Guinness and other European beers.
“We said we’d do the opposite of what the big breweries and bars do,” says Phil. “Soon we couldn’t keep up with demand; people were thirsty to get hold of interesting beers.”
Within a few years, Phil and friends had founded Matilda Bay on the Swan River, opened 39 pubs across Australia, were sending beer interstate and dispatched a team to France to bring back a traditional brewery. Suitably inspired, a flurry of other breweries opened.

quickly gained a following, aided by a few timely occurrences: the local Rajneesh community appreciated the ethos and made it their regular haunt; Alan Bond brought the America’s Cup to Fremantle within months of opening; and Irish and British ex-pats came flooding when word spread

Yet towards the end of the Millennium, it seemed little progress had been made. The first wave of Australian craft breweries was rapidly receding, many either snapped up by bigger fish or failing due to an inability to make either good quality or consistent beer. Matilda Bay had been floated on the stock market and later bought by Foster’s, leaving Phil to focus on his wine business in the Margaret River.
So how did today’s situation arise? A new wave of brewers appeared, many inspired to abandon their previous careers following trips to the US, Europe and the UK. A wider range of excellent imported beers became more readily available and contrasted with much of what was being produced in Australia. And the internet opened up access to the wider world of beer, bringing both information on how to brew better beer and insight into what was happening at the cutting, creative edge of the

industry, particularly in the US where the first wave of craft beer was still gaining momentum.
Many microbreweries opened in popular tourist areas, often offering an alternative to wineries, while others like Melbourne’s Mountain Goat were gaining traction in their local community. A handful of visionary bar and bottleshop owners realised they could establish a point of difference and, gradually, the standard of beers being produced by the small brewers began to rise.
At the other end of the scale, major brewery ownership of Matilda Bay gave its beers a greater reach, as did Lion’s ownership of Sydney’s Malt Shovel Brewery – brewers of the James Squire range. Meanwhile, over in Freo, Little Creatures – the venture that saw Phil Sexton reluctantly re-enter the beer world – had released a Pale Ale that was exciting palates like nothing else brewed on these shores.



YET TO VENTURE INTO CRAFT BEER?
Try these on for size.



STONE & WOOD PACIFIC ALE
An all-Australian tropical fruit hit from Byron Bay, recently named Australia’s Best Beer by critics.



FERAL HOP HOG
Twice-named Australia’s Champion Ale. A perfect Aussie take on hop-heavy US IPAs.



BRIDGE ROAD SAISON
One of the best Aussie recreations of the fruity, spicy, tart Belgian farmhouse style.



KNAPPSTEIN RESERVE LAGER
Most mainstream Aussie beers are lagers. None taste like this from the Clare Valley.



HOLGATE TEMPRESS
Dutch cocoa and vanilla beans make this chocolate porter a luxurious dessert beer.

Bridge Road Brewers founder Ben Kraus, who trained as a winemaker before turning to brewing, says this was a turning point for beer. “People’s education and awareness has changed a great deal, pushed by the breweries creating new styles of beer, venues demanding new products and consumers wanting to try something new,” he says. “The curve on the graph has just started to accelerate, it’s generating momentum and will keep growing exponentially over the next 10 years.”
Ben believes the wine industry is a good indicator of where beer is moving. “People used to order a wine because it was sweet or dry, but now they know more, they will want a certain grape

variety, even down to the area in which it was produced,” he says. “Beer’s heading in the same direction with people starting to ask for certain styles.”
If they visit his Beechworth brewery, they have plenty to choose from, with a range that includes a Chestnut Pilsner, highly hopped ales, several variants on the saison style that originates in Europe and limited release hybrids that are unique. It is among a growing number of Australian breweries pushing the boundaries of what beer can be.
Feral Brewing in Swan Valley has been experimenting with sour beers, including one fermented with wild yeasts borne on the region’s air; several, including Red Hill on the Mornington Peninsula, Moo Brew in Hobart and Holgate in Woodend regularly produce barrel-aged beers; Wig & Pen in Canberra has several taps of traditional UK-style cask ale.
There are many more unafraid to experiment, including Shawn Sherlock, head brewer at Murray’s. Originally a tiny

brewery in the iconic Pub With No Beer in Taylors Arm, NSW, the operation has since moved to Port Stephens and, in May, opened a venue in Sydney’s Manly. Sales have tripled in each of the past two years.
“Things are changing so fast,” says Shawn. “There are so many new brewers coming along, many with new ideas. There’s still a mix of the older style approach of making a lager, Aussie pale ale and wheat beer and building from there, but there are a few guys going hard from day one to brew out their beers.”
“It’s typical of Australia that for various reasons there’s been a slow take-up [of craft beer] compared to some countries, but once people get into it, they really get into it.”
Among Murray’s latest releases are an oak-aged imperial stout made with a funky Belgian yeast, a highly floral 7.4% lager and a full-flavoured and bitter ale containing just 2.8% alcohol. Many could never be placed in any style guideline,

which is an approach Shawn hopes is helping Australia’s developing beer scene become more than just a copy of others. “There’s a real core of interesting and passionate brewers out there,” he says. “We’re not reinventing the wheel but are inspired by and taking different elements from different cultures to create something that’s distinctively Australian.”

(breakout graphic)

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