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## EATER AT LARGE

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

# BROOKLYN BREWERY SCENE

*Afternoon hoisting.*



WILLIAMSBURG—On any Saturday afternoon, when the Brooklyn Brewery offers tours of the works and a selection of its brews, the tasting room becomes many things. It's a pick-up joint and a frat party. It's a connoisseurs' wateringhole and non-discriminating beerlovers' convention. It's a fashion show of mod haircuts and vintage clothing. And it's a place to take the family.

When the mercury falls outside, this old brick building, with massive windows that bathe the place in light, is remarkably cozy, and not just because of the warming effect of alcohol.

"Folks stop by and get over their hangovers by sipping," said a woman working the taps tucked into the far corner of the room. Despite the more than one hundred people in the room, there never seemed to be more than a half dozen people waiting in line for the wide selection of brews at \$3 a serving—some sort of courtesy of the collective unconscious. (During its Friday night happy hours, from 6 to 11 p.m., the brewery offers a similar deal.)

"We've been doing this for last six years," said Rich, an attorney in a Rangers jersey and hat turned backwards, who works in Manhattan, lives

in Greenpoint and grew up in Williamsburg. He shared his table with Deron, a financial manager who lives in lower Manhattan. "We used to come here when we were the only two people in the fucking place," he added with fondness in his voice. Back then the place was "dead empty," and songs were played on request. (On this particular day, Cold Play and Beck made the rounds.) The two met when mutual friends got into an ancient beer-hall dispute. "They got into Yankees versus Red Sox. Now we're back at the scene of the crime."

The tours, Rich remembered, the ostensible purpose of these happy hours, used to be shorter. But the 15-minute spiel stretched into half an hour as customers asked more savvy—or less savvy—questions and the legend of the brewery grew. "I went on so many tours, I could have given the tour," he said. The brewery used to offer four, 16-ounce samples for free. Today, the cups are smaller and they're each \$3. (For good reason, on a typical Friday night or Saturday afternoon, the brewery typically pours about 1,000 beers.) But, Rich and company—and pretty much everyone else in the room—aren't complaining. "Your beer dollar goes very far here compared to elsewhere in New York," Deron said.

Apparently, the demographics have also shifted in recent years. “This used to be a sausage fest,” Rich said. “It used to be all locals. Now it’s artists, hippy-dippies, out of staters, internationals.” (The brewery notes frequent visitors from beer-drinking nations like Germany and Denmark, and a fare share from Japan and China interested in the Brooklyn mystique.) “Now it’s more of a destination. Before it was a place where low-lives came to drink for free. Now it’s where the cool people come to drink.”

In fact, on the other side of the room, in a sun-bathed corner, a couple were whispering sweet nothings with beer-scented breath when a reporter said hello. “This is our first time,” said Ryan, a shaggy-haired-and-brown-goated musician from Park Slope, who is a big fan of the brewery. His girlfriend, Korey, a petite blonde wearing a tight black turtleneck and black Macy Grey-style hat, was visiting from Chicago. “It’s like a party. It’s really *hop*-pening.” They both started to giggle. “You can print that,” she continued. “Give us a couple of chocolate drinks and we’re done. We’ll say anything.”

She was referring to the chocolate brew, more mocha espresso than beer. The couple seemed to sober up temporarily. “Oh my God, the tour was so much fun,” said Korey. “It was interactive and entertaining. It’s educational, but they don’t get really specific. They just give you an overview of what the big machines do.” Ryan added, “We really appreciated the history. We learned that some of the recipes are pre-Prohibition.” (Brooklyn was home to 48 breweries prior to Prohibition. Only two survived, Schaefer and Rheingold.)

The Black Stout Chocolate Brew was one of the eight beers on draught, listed on a chalkboard along with Lager, Brown, IPA, Pilsner, Weisse, Pennant, Smoked Porter, and Fortitude. “Sometimes we roll out a cask of something special when we’re feeling cheeky,” said Karl Knopp, operations manager at the brewery, who has been on rotating duty at the weekend happy hours for three years. Like many of the nation’s other brewmasters, Brewmaster Garrett Oliver prides himself on the cycle of seasonal beers, offering winter microbrews that are heartier, spicier, and more alcoholic. Consider the just-released Brooklyn Winter Ale, a “winter warmer” modeled on the satisfying malty ales of blustery Scotland that is a bit stronger than a normal beer (it has 6 percent alcohol). It’s often spiced (last year’s version was, but this year’s wasn’t), and pairs well with robust winter foods such as stews and game. “Something about the richness of these beers seems appropriate for winter,” said Oliver. “More suited than, say, pilsner, for a pint in front of the fireplace. Though with global warming apparently in full swing, we may have very few pints in front of the fireplace this winter.”

The tasting room also serves as a launching ground for the limited-edition Brewmasters Reserve series and a new line of cork-finished beers (bottled like champagne). Visitors this winter will likely encounter the new Brewmasters Reserve called “Cuvée D’Achouffe Ale, a spicy Belgian style ale that resulted from the second collaboration between Oliver and the famed microbrewery Brasserie d’Achouffe in Luxembourg, as well as, by late February, the first cork-finished release, Brooklyn Local 1, a unique golden brew that made using the ancient, and now rare, technique of fermenting in the bottle.

For a nation raised on insipid Bud, such diversity can be overwhelming. “One thing that I always enjoy seeing,” said Knopp, “is when a group of people come up to the bar and each person orders a different style of



our beers. Then they taste them, trade them, and pass them around. Some people’s eyes light up when they first try a beer they’ve never tasted before. Some people claim that they “don’t like beer,” but we have such a diverse selection of styles we always manage to find a brew that they will love.” Inspiring such epiphanies is sort of the point. “It’s not our goal to make a ton of money,” he explained. “Otherwise, we’d stay open until 4 a.m. And if we did that, we’d put a lot of local bars out of business.”

Still, the limited tasting sessions serve as an essential testing ground for new brews. Brooklyn Brewery selections are the fifth most popular draft in Manhattan and are offered as far south as Georgia, as far north as Maine, and as far west as Michigan. “We use this as a launching pad for our Brewmaster Reserve series and other new beers,” said Knopp. The tastings also provide essential market research. “The chocolate is popular with the ladies,” said Knopp. On cue, a man flanked by two women approaches the counter saying, “Couple of chocolates.”

On Saturdays, the brewery encourages visitors, particularly families, to bring their own food, and a few tables are littered with takeout menus from pizza joints, Middle Eastern restaurants and delicatessens. “The delivery guys for all the local joints love us,” said Knopp. “They come in early just to drop off menus.”

And the setting is remarkably kid-friendly. At a picnic table not too far from a round table of sour-looking Goths, three adults sat sipping beer while their three kids sat enjoying pizza. The couple from Park Slope had an infant in car seat propped on the table. Their friend, a man visiting from Maryland, where he enjoys Brooklyn beer, brought his two young girls, who alternated taking bites of pizza and dashing off to explore the brewing tanks.

It’s really no problem to have kids here,” said Ed, a software engineer from Park Slope. “They can roam. They can make noise. If we went to a museum, we’d be shushed.” Twenty minutes earlier, when their kids got hungry, they considered leaving, until they saw the delivery menus on the tables and used their cell phone to order the pie. (It arrived just under 10 minutes later.)

It’s worth noting that the brewery has never reported a fight, something the managers chalks up to the early closing time that discourages the rougher crowd. Rich, the attorney who is a certified regular, and who has admitted leaving here in a compromised state more than once, offered another explanation for the pacific history. “It’s all common cause,” he said. “Good beer.” □