

CRAFT

Beer Wine & Spirits

Community Engagement

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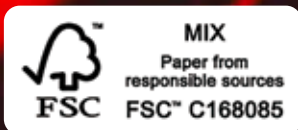
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Published In Maine

March | April 2026

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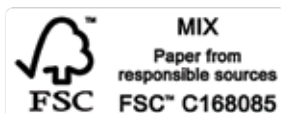
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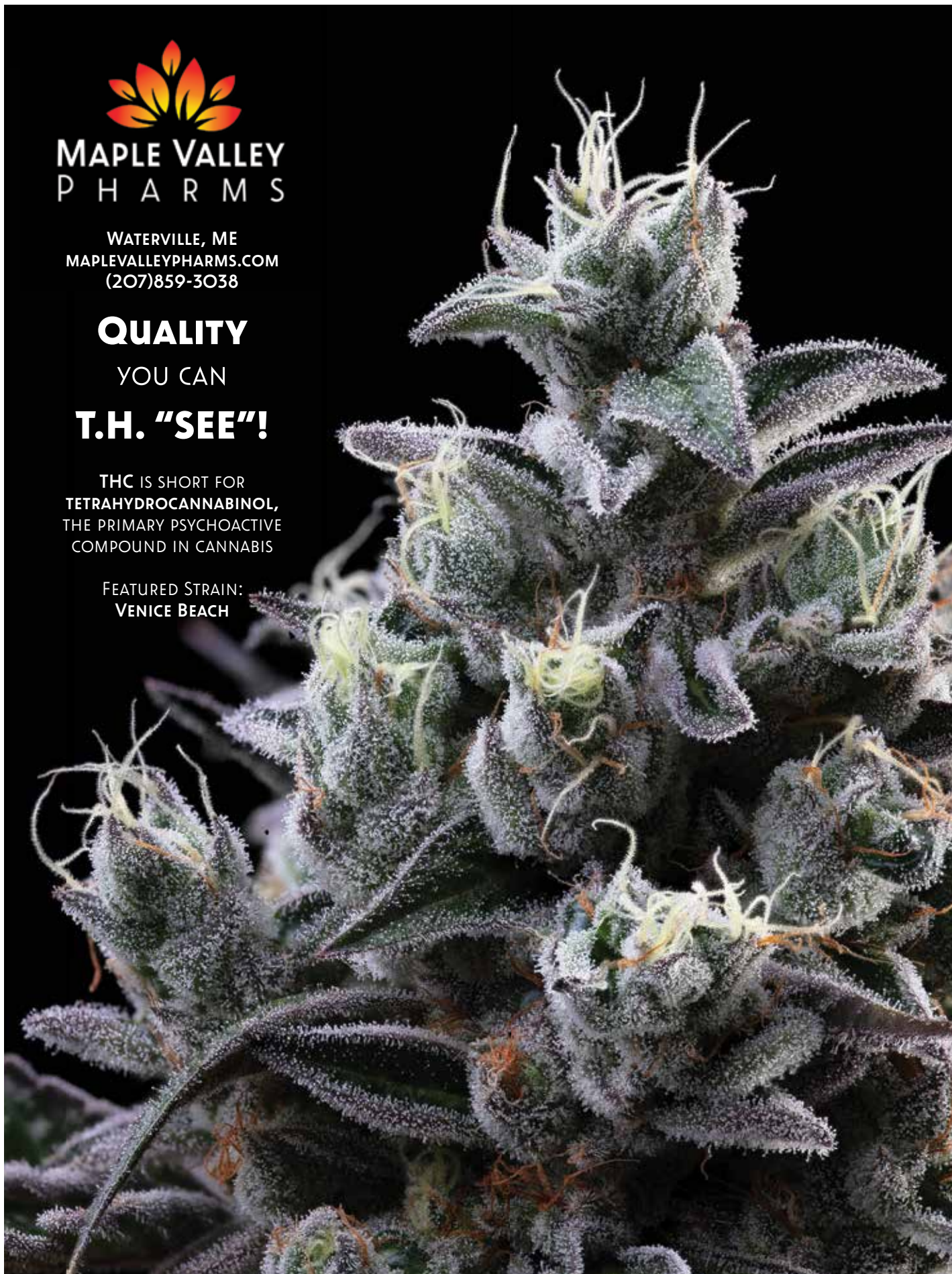
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Community Engagement

Do You Need Drinking People Around You

Written by Jeff Cutler



Togetherness. Camaraderie. Friendship. Affinity. Regardless of how you define your tribe, it's all community. The interactions between people can go a couple directions. And people as a species are overwhelmingly in favor of positive interactions.

First off, defining the word 'positive' could be tricky.

Some folks think a UFC fight broadcast in full bloody, bruising glory is a positive viewing experience. Others might think sitting around a table drinking tea with maple syrup while artistic rubber stamping is a positive event.

In the world of spirits and beer, community can be defined a few

ways. If we go deep, the community of beer goes far and wide.

From concept to consumption, the liquids we pour down our gullets have had a ridiculously long journey. And it's one governed by community...especially here in Maine.

Let's take a look...

According to stories on News Center Maine and an independent statistics organization, the following might pique your interest when it comes to booze and community behavior.

As we're in the depths of Winter and single-digit temperatures, people spend a bit less time drinking BUT they spend more of their drinking time with friends.

Drinking Culture



The articles and news stories speak to three trends that upend some numbers. These trends include a **Winter Slump** (less entertaining; everyone stocked up for the holidays; people are fed up with people).

Next comes a **Post-January Recovery**.

February shows up on the calendar and people start drinking again. Not everyone does a month off and then starts anew with vigor. There are plenty of people that use Dry-January as an impetus to slow down drinking overall.

But just like ANY weight loss program or self-help course, things don't change unless there is an infinite commitment to a lifestyle or personal change. So, for those who dropped booze for 31 days, the numbers say you'll be back by **St. Patrick's Day**.

Third on this list of trends is the Storm Factor.

This behavior is puzzling in some ways. It seems like the Winter Slump and Dry-January together. Nobody buys any beer. The alcohol bottles are still pretty full. And the wine is down to half a case, but you don't have a **dinner planned until Easter**.

So, the Storm Factor rears its face when, on a Tuesday afternoon, a friend from Portland says they're coming up to Rangeley for the weekend. They're going ice fishing BUT they cannot deal without

seeing a Celtics game scheduled for Saturday.

Faced with a surprise guest who clearly will be drinking because they invited themselves over to watch sports at your house...**YOU ARE IN TROUBLE**.

You had done so well.

Didn't drink at all for the first couple weeks.

Only had two each week to wrap up January. Then the groundhog came.

Toast to six more weeks. Toast to Portland Hearts of Pine home opener on April 11. Toast to TWO-DIGIT degrees on the thermometer. Toast to your friends.

Because as the weather warms and people emerge from their caves, like bears in Acadia, moods get better. **People want to gather**, and they want to drink because it's been cold, there's been a lot of extended family time, there have been errands that happen only once a year, and frankly cabin fever is a real thing.

We need people around us and that brings its own challenges.

Some will point out that excessive drinking often happens in groups. National data says 51% of beer drinkers have at least one beer a week. 24% of beer drinkers consume beer three times a month. And in Maine, almost 22% of adults engage in heavier drinking — which

Drinking Culture



occurs most often in social groups.

So, is there an answer?

All these numbers speak to the benefit of community even if you spend that time with others consuming alcohol. How can you keep a level keep and still make the most of **your community** AND your precious alcohol?

Here's my cheat sheet for making community and alcohol work together...at least until you can go for a hike and get away from humans. I'm not bitter, by the way, just cold and tired. :-)

Three ways to enjoy people and booze while remaining positive, happy and kind:

Ask questions

People love to talk about themselves, so reach out and find out what people have been doing since you last saw them. This will make people feel good about being near you and that's step one.

Frequent some new places

Jumping back into habits can be OK if your habits are good. It's also fun to shift things up a little from time to time. In our little town on the coast, a brewery closed and was immediately occupied by a new tavern which, in its first week, is the new hotspot in town and the buzz

about going there to get buzzed is almost deafening around town. New spot, good vibe, **GO THERE!**

Protect your time

Remember, we just wrapped up the holiday season. You might be burnt out. You might be trying to detox for bit. You might want to continue on a solo path for a while. None of this is wrong. Take the time you need for yourself. Having a glass of wine at home alone doesn't carry the same stigma it used to.

After you recharge this way, **you'll be a better part of the community.** Win-win.

Ultimately, Maine seasons can drive people to places they don't want to be. The snow and sleet and ice can impact you in ways you abhor and they can make you angry and bitter.

Believe me, nothing lasts. So take a deep breath and look ahead. The community you had before — or the community you are building every day — will give back so much more than you put into it.

So, start 2026 with baby steps. Work your way up to seeing your friends and family again. Add to and continue to **build your community**, because with that group around you and supporting you, there's nothing you can't do.

You might have a best friend out there in the world, but remember that your beer friends are right **here for you in Maine.** 🍷



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Who's at the Bar Anymore?

Jonathan Strieff

If asked to bring to mind the essential character of “Craft Community,” in Maine’s expansive brewery and bar scene, many late era Baby Boomers and older Gen-Xers

might understandably recall Ted Danson and the rest of the cast of *Cheers* hollering, “NORM!” as George Wednt entered the scene from stage left, looking for a cold beer and a sympathetic ear. Millennial readers will more likely picture the grittier, dimly lit, “pug fugly,” atmosphere of Moe’s Tavern, where America’s best loved alcoholic father would stop off for happy hour on his way home from another hard day at Springfield’s nuclear power plant. If an equivalent fictional watering hole is currently being broadcast to Generations Z and Alpha over TikTok or Tubi, at 38 I’m already too old to care to learn about it.

Bars in general loom large in the collective imagination. Over drinks at The Prancing Pony Inn, Frodo and his companions set in motion

the events that would make up J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic trilogy. Luke and Obi Wan didn’t proposition Han Solo at his home or office, but accompanied by the din of the extraterrestrial jazz combo at the

Mos Eisley Cantina. One can easily imagine the smokey, lantern lit pubs where early colonists conspired to overthrow British forces quartered within their own homes and, as homesteaders and

ranchers expanded into the western territories, plenty of settlements got by without a bank or post office, but every one certainly had a saloon.

Pubs, or Public Houses, make for such propulsive settings in fiction and real life alike because they embody a concept introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenberg, called “The Third Place.” Oldenberg argues while the majority of our waking hours are spent juggling the responsibilities of home and work, societies have historically provided social outlets where the concerns of both can be set aside, and that the relaxation, good company, and creative thinking that result are essential for healthy civic life. Third Places offer relief from the demands of everyday life and provide the sense of inclusiveness and belonging that connects individuals to their larger commu-

nity. Unlike churches, clubs, or political parties, Third Places bring people together without any rigid guiding principles or exclusiveness of membership. They are egalitarian, unpretentious, and self-selecting



of patrons and, in this way, offer what might be the most vibrant and dynamic gathering places anywhere in society.

One detail Oldenberg fails to acknowledge is the scores of hard working men and women for whom our Third Places are their places of business. If these bars and cafes are truly the foundations of civic engagement and democracy, as he claims, minimum wage plus tips doesn't come close to compensating our servers for shouldering that kind of burden.

Last year, I spent a month collecting horror stories from local bartenders about their most difficult customers. Even after omitting the redundant dirty old man stories, what remained could have filled multiple issues of this magazine. Everyone I met had stories they were eager to share and any one of them easily met the criteria for the most outrageous thing I've ever heard. There was the 21st birthday party that ended with the birthday boy being carried out in his friend's arms while announcing, "I'm doing it! I'm fucking doing it! I'm fucking levitating!" There was the self-professed, "master of disguise," who liked to frequent one Augusta bar with the pockets of his trench coat filled with baby snakes; or the LSD-fueled fist fight that spilled out of one Hollowell bar into the middle of Water Street and required dispatches from Hollowell PD, state troopers and capitol police to break up; or the low-grade riot

incited at one Waterville bar when college administrators showered their undergraduate classes with Free Drink tickets to celebrate something called "Colby Night."

I naively assumed that I could just as easily amass stories of loyal, lovable regulars, coworkers going above and beyond, or neighborly bartenders to fit the theme of "Craft Community," but the echoing refrain I heard after introducing my pitch this year was, "What do you mean?" While stories of difficult customers gushed out with only the slightest provocation, I found many bartenders became suddenly interested in polishing the pint glasses when asked to recognize some unsung heroes in their line of work.

I managed to draw out some sincere reflections with a little persistence. Casey B. in Belfast described the cross training that takes place between the bartenders and kitchen staff at Marshal's Wharf as creating a cohesive spirit to the place that benefits everyone. He also wanted to single out two regulars who had left their impression on the years he'd worked there.

"They're two retired brothers," he told me, "who are here every single day right when we open. They order two beers and talk for about an hour and then head home. If they don't show up, it upsets the whole day and puts us on edge, like if a hurricane was coming."

One server told me about





the check that the bar owner wrote her when a garage fire forced her and her son out of their apartment, but the most common response I got to the question of community was a reference to a bi-weekly or monthly Trivia Night. Any contrivance that gets people socializing is positive in my opinion, but I hardly think the cliquish teams vying for fabulous prizes and bragging rights over trivia questions quite embodies the Third Place spirit.

Maine is home to nearly 200 different craft breweries statewide, but that is hardly reflected in the offerings on tap. For all but the biggest players, the market realities of the moment seemingly favor bottling 4-packs of tall boys for home consumption over distributing kegs to local bars. Since the pandemic, Netflix, Grubhub, Tinder, and the like

have successfully shuttled many of the most enjoyable aspects of public life into the privacy of our own homes. If the vitality of Third Places in a society reflects the health of civic engagement, this rapid shift towards individualized everything does not bode well.

The situation may look different in Portland or Boston, but throughout Central Maine barstools sit tragically empty every single night of the week. Dusty mugs and stemware remain high on their shelves, aching to be put to use. At the same time, people young and old drink alone at home while scrolling through listicles about tips for overcoming loneliness. Going out and visiting your local bar might not save American democracy, but plenty of worse ideas have already been tried. 🍷



How our Saturday Night Dinner Club became a living Craft Community in Maine



Written by Beverly Ann Soucy

On Saturday nights, twice a month, something quietly extraordinary happens in our little corner of Western Maine. It doesn't announce itself loudly. There are no tickets, no sponsors, no hashtags or social media strategies. There's just a long table, set with care, waiting patiently for the evening to begin.

The dishes are passed family-style or laid out as a generous buffet. Bottles are opened. Pitchers of ice water are set within reach. Empty glasses line the table, ready for whatever choice you make for your dinner libations. This isn't a restaurant, though the food could hold its own in any professional kitchen. It's not a tasting room, though the wines and spirits are chosen with the same thoughtfulness you'd find among Maine's best makers. It's not a formal dinner party either, although the table is always set with intention and the dinner guests arrive not as guests, but as family, bringing stories and laughter and whatever the week left heavy on their mind with an easy closeness for settling in for conversation and comfort.

What it is, simply, is our Saturday Night Dinner Club.

The word *club* feels a little formal for what is, at its heart, a chosen family. We range in age from our mid-forties to well into our seventies. We come from different professions, different paths, different seasons of life, and different ideas of what community can look like. What unites us is food, yes, but more than that, a shared belief that community isn't something you wait for. It's something you make. One dinner. One dessert. One drink and one gathering at a time.

In an era when so many of us eat standing up because we are just so busy, or alone, distracted, scrolling, or rushing between obligations, this dinner group feels almost radical in its simplicity. All it asks is that you arrive hungry and open to good food, great conversation, and anticipate a whole lot of laughter. This table has become a place to practice something increasingly rare: gathering for the sake of simply being together.

Craft Maine has long told the stories of people who make things with Intention. The brewers who wait patiently on fermentation. Winemakers who work the land season after season and who are dependent on the weather for their years crop. Distillers who understand that patience itself is an ingredient. And let's not forget all of the wonderful recipes that combine all three for each issue we publish. It is the definition of this magazine. What happens at our Saturday night dinner parties belongs to that same lineage of Craft. Because craft, at its heart, isn't only about what is produced. It's about care and intention and the love that goes into it all. And how those rare qualities shape the final outcome for creating something wonderful.

Our Dinner Club is made up of ten to fourteen friends depending on the week and everyone's schedules. Every other week, one person chooses a cultural or seasonal theme, and from there the evening unfolds collaboratively. Everyone contributes a dish that fits the theme. Beverages; wine, beer, cocktails, or spirits are chosen to complement the menu and reflect the place or tradition being explored for the dinner theme and some nights it ends up being just a silly mixture with an equally silly name to fit the theme of the evening. Everything is homemade and everything is offered freely. But most importantly every single thing comes from the heart.



Food & Wine

Sometimes the inspiration is a place; Japan, coastal Italy, the south of France, the Mediterranean. Sometimes it's rooted in seasonality, where it is a winter feast honoring the long dark nights, filled with root vegetables and hearty stews or a summer spread celebrating the abundance of the seasonal bounty with loads of fresh greens and desserts. Sometimes the theme emerges from something happening out in the world, with a desire to understand it better rather than retreat from it all. What results is far more than a meal. It is a living, breathing expression of an actual Craft community, one rooted not in commerce or glossy pages, but for sharing a real Craft connection.

If you look closely, you can see the landscape of Maine reflected in the people gathered around the table. Among us are sheep and llama farmers, who grow vibrant microgreens in large greenhouses all year round, on their land. They are educated and passionate and often arrive carrying bowls of greens cut just hours earlier, impossibly fresh. They always come through the door with something delicious and vegetarian, carefully researched and lovingly prepared, a quiet tribute to the theme of the evening and to the care they bring to the table. Their understanding of food begins in the soil, and is shaped by the weather and patience, and daily attention as well as their mindfulness in caring for the planet in the way only a farmer can.

There are lawyers at the table, too. One couple owns horses and understands land through movement and stewardship while raising free thinking daughters, who know their worth and the power of their own voices, while practicing law in a small rural town, and standing up for their beliefs, always offering thoughtful insights from different perspectives who are shaping the world in lasting ways.

The other couple brings a devotion to their family that quietly grounds everything they do, along with dry humor and thoughtful educated observation's. They are deeply involved in volunteering throughout the community and known for standing up for their beliefs while raising a very large family with traditional values and respect.

There are several educators in this little group of ours, two of which are married teachers who are vibrant, outdoor enthusiasts, and fierce advocates for community responsibility, that gift that same energy to their students and who are lifelong learners and adventurers themselves. They bring the same curiosity and care to the table and to the conversations that they bring to their classrooms.

There is a retired artist-educator whose wit moves as quickly as her kindness, whose heart shines through her words, and who makes the very best desserts. She reminds us that humor is a vital part of wisdom and that laughter may be one of the most effective

binding agents we have. And then there is me, an artist, herbalist, and writer, still a little amazed and in awe every time we gather by the feeling of simple belonging, of being seen, and most of all, for being heard. And the food? Exceptional. Every single time.

The house that holds us all is owned by a nationally known muralist, now a rural community beloved art teacher, famous for large-scale installations up and down the East Coast and famous in the community to every little kid he encounters. His hands are as expressive in table settings as they are on scaffolding. His work invites people to see themselves and the possibilities of shared space differently. Filled with color and whimsy and most of all inspiration. He and his partner, a personal chef in his own right, have transformed their home into something that feels less like a residence and more like a cultural commons.

It's a large historical building that they've lovingly restored and turned into a kind of living museum of curiosities. Books are stacked floor to ceiling. Art lines every free space on the walls. There are antiques in every corner, each with their own stories to tell. The presence of the past owners lingers gently in those rooms. Conversations move through the space and leave behind echoes of shared meals. The walls seem to listen intently. Their three rescue dogs, very much a part of the family and of our dinner gatherings, patrol the rooms during every gathering, an equally important part of the dinner club, greeting each guest, nudging for pats and possible treats, reminding us that hospitality extends well beyond humans and that love for all creatures both human and canine matters deeply.

The in-house chef's presence is felt throughout the evening, never dominating, always generous, with an easy smile, offering extra spoons, shifting meals around to fit the table and for helping plates find their place. There is no hierarchy here. Only shared responsibility and shared pleasure.

Dinner themes are chosen thoughtfully in the days that lead up to dinner, often formed by current events, seasonal shifts, or a desire to understand another culture more deeply through food and new recipes. A Japanese-inspired evening might grow out of conversations about respect for simple ingredients and balanced values that resonate deeply with Maine's own food traditions. Now and then, the theme is shaped by the news of the week giving us a reason to gather and to discuss current events and for remembering our shared ground instead of buying into the division that seems to be constant on all media platforms. Dishes and the country of origin are researched by us all. Techniques and ingredients are discussed during dinner. The result is never imitation, but a genuine appreciation for our cultural differences.

What strikes me again and again is the humility at the table.



Food & Wine

Knowledge is shared not as expertise, but as an offering. We talk about seasonality, current events and ways to process it all in order to find a middle ground for preserving peace. Conversations drift naturally toward larger ideas for knowing and learning about other cultures and for expressing values through food. How survival and ingenuity and living-on-less shapes not just cuisines, but entire cultures, and how each of us is feeling about current events. These aren't debates across barricades. They are reflections passed gently alongside serving dishes with friends.

Food becomes the entry point, not the end. And maybe that's the most important thing of all. This dinner club has taught me that when people are fed well, they listen and connect in a much deeper way with a better understanding of our similarities. They speak more thoughtfully. They remember their shared humanity and the importance of thankfulness for the things we share together in those moments when so many are not so lucky. I truly believe the world's problems could be softened if not solved, simply by sitting down together and breaking bread.

For a magazine devoted to Maine's Craft Beer, Wine, and Spirits community, it's worth saying this plainly: Craft does not live only in production spaces. It lives in how we gather, how we host, how we create and for how we pay attention to one another. The beverages at our table on these nights are chosen with the same intentionality that defines Maine's best makers. We value local whenever possible. We value the stories that come with those choices. One night it's a bottle from a small vineyard someone visited years ago. Another night it's a spirit rescued from the back of a cabinet, opened simply to be shared.

There is curiosity in our little group without snobbery. We share appreciation for each other without pretense and through it all, a whole lotta laughter especially when we come to the realization that we still have much to learn not just about the world at large but about each other. In that way, our dinner table becomes a quiet extension of Maine's craft ecosystem where the makers, educators, thinkers, friends and neighbors intersect. And somewhere between the passing of plates and the telling of stories we remember something essential: that we belong to one another and are more alike than we are different. The simple act of coming together for dinner might just be everything about everything.

There is a sweetness in this little group of ours. We share what we love and don't love without putting on airs. By the time we reach dessert, something much sweeter has already settled over the table. The warmth of the group and a comfort of being together so that dessert feels less like the end of the meal and more like a reflection of the night itself.

After dinner, games are as much a part of the evening as the food.

Downright silly childhood games that send us all into fits of laughter where winning doesn't really matter, what matters is the company and the connection.

In warmer months, our dinners spill outdoors. Doors stay open. Plates wander outside. Someone inevitably suggests a game of bocce ball. Shoes come off and the evening stretches into dusk ending with a fire in the pit. Sometimes a bubble machine appears, and for a few minutes we are all kids again, laughter rising into the night air. These moments matter more than we admit. They remind us that fun isn't frivolous, it's necessary. Being together without an agenda is its own quiet form of resistance to the fragmentation so many of us feel right now.

I am not sure when it happened but somewhere along the way, many of us stopped hosting dinner parties. Life just got busy and houses felt too small along with our expectations, which grew too large. I think we simply forgot that hospitality doesn't require perfection or a plan.

Our dinner club isn't about flawless menus or curated tablescapes, although the tables are always beautiful, dressed with care and matching the theme of the dinner by our hosts. It's about showing up with what you have and trusting that it's enough and even if you are not contributing it is still enough to just be there. This isn't nostalgia for a bygone era. It's a reminder that community has always been built in kitchens and around tables. That shared meals are how humans mark time. It is how we celebrate survival, and how we make meaning and memories together. In Maine, where winter teaches us the value of gathering for getting through the long, dark, cold nights and summer reminds us to linger a little longer, this feels especially important now.

I don't write this as a prescription, as every community dinner will look a little different to each of you. Every table inevitably finds its own rhythm with time. What I hope for is you the reader, take away from all of this is a simple invitation to start small and bring dinner parties back to the forefront. Choose a theme, invite a handful of people maybe a few friends and people you want to know better. Open a bottle with intention, dig out your mismatched plates and let the evening be wonderfully imperfect. Out of that, I am certain, something magical and nourishing will grow.

In the end, Craft isn't only about what we make with our hands. It's about the way we make other people feel when we are together. Sometimes the most meaningful thing we can Craft is a place where people feel welcome and valued, breaking bread together, twice a month, on a Saturday night, around a long, beautifully-dressed table, somewhere in Western Maine. 🍷

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Photo By Mike Lianza

Craft Starts With a ‘C’ So Does Community

Written by Dave Bolton

Ask someone to name one segment of the beer industry that divides opinions and sparks debate among the drinking community, and there is little doubt that it would be craft. Irrespective of whether you love IPAs, lagers, sours, pilsners, cask ale or the seasonal availability of marzens and pumpkin beers, there are a plethora of choices that delight and divide in (almost) equal measures. Weirdly, this is a good thing and undeniable confirmation that the craft beer community is a club worth belonging to.

If you are reading this magazine, you are probably a fully-paid up member of the Maine-based community. You might even have your own mug hanging on a hook at your favorite taproom or craft-centric bar.

In fact, if we think about the definition of community itself — a group of people sharing common interests, characteristics, or geographic locations, united by social ties and a sense of belonging — then you don’t need to travel far to find people that share the characteristics, cohesion and identities associated with the average craft beer drinker.

Future beer historians will likely be able to pinpoint the exact moment when the community became more than just a nascent network of passionate craft brewers and end drinkers. And while there is a widespread perception that it’s a 21st century phenomenon fueled by bearded hipsters and funky flavor profiles, the roots of the community go back decades.

From a timeline perspective, it’s almost certain that the modern craft beer community (as we know it) has been around for more than 50 years, with global roots that pre-date the original creation of an East Coast hazy IPA by some considerable distance.

There is documented evidence that the calls for more craft beer got louder in the 1970s. This dovetailed with more people wanting to be part of something that tapped into their idea of community and, by association, the desire to drink local beers made by local people. Commercial breweries dominated the market place, but a drinking revolution was already (pun intended) brewing on both

sides of the pond.

In 1972, for example, the concept of an independent brewery in the UK was exactly that. The majority of beer drinkers got their pints from commercial breweries, many of whom also owned the pubs, bars and restaurants where beer could be supped. Home brewing was still extremely niche in Great Britain, with the creation of guilds and brewing societies in the 14th and 16th centuries ensuring that the average English, Scottish or Welsh beer drinker was actively discouraged from trying to brew something for themselves.

On-premise brewing had gradually disappeared from the English pub scene, with large-scale brewers dominating the market. Independent breweries were few and far between, albeit that the ones that did exist were focused almost exclusively on cask ales. This status quo began to shift in the mid-70s with the rise of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA), a community that received both plaudits for wanting to enjoy more traditional beers and mockery for drinking pints of what (to the uninformed) looked like dirty water. With twigs and floating things.

Europeans had been using artisanal techniques for centuries, but the increased availability of home brewing equipment in both the UK and USA moved the goalposts in such a way that the term “microbrewery” became not only part of a movement away from mass-produced beers but also a way of life for people who enjoyed the variety of flavor profiles that craft beer offered them. This community would soon be the backbone of the craft beer industry.

I am ashamed to admit that in my youth, I was one of the people who pointed and laughed at the CAMRA drinkers. I started my beer journey in 1986, and it was essentially lager — inevitably non-UK and probably Danish — that was my go-to. I couldn’t understand cask ales or bitters, and I didn’t want to. With the benefit of hindsight, I was an idiot. But I digress.

Despite the national availability of iconic (and mass-produced) beer brands, America actually beat the Brits to the start of the craft beer line. The fledgling craft beer community first popped its



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head above the fermenting tanks in 1965, with the purchase of the Anchor Brewing Company in San Francisco by a visionary (and independent) brewer.

This was considered to be a turning point for the brewing industry in the United States. The deregulation of the beer market in 1978 by then-president Jimmy Carter saw an explosion in micro- and home-brewing activity, with most people turning their experimental gaze towards what they considered to be traditional forms of beer (ales, stouts, IPAs, bitters).

At the start of the 1980s, there were approximately 89 breweries in the U.S. According to the Brewers Association, Carter's decision to make brewing more accessible to people who wanted to brew was a catalyst for why craft beer became the norm for most end drinkers. By the end of 2024, there were almost 10,000.

In the 48 years since he signed the Home Brewing Act into law, the former hobbyists have ensured that the craft beer community is more than just a network of independent brewers, consumers and advocates. The accepted definition of community gives us some insight into a) what it actually means and b) why it matters.

For those of us that spend more time than they should in brewery taprooms and bars that serve a variety of Maine-based beers, then the idea of being part of this end drinking community is both ingrained and part of who we are. Let me give you an example.

In mid-January, I agreed to meet Jeff Cutler, my fellow Craft writer, for a quick drink in Portland. Granted, the actual purpose of the meet-up was to hit the Hearts of Pine pro-shop and spend money on branded soccer-related merch that we didn't need, but we made our purchases and then ruminated over what to do for the next couple of hours.

The ubiquitous taproom next to the store was sadly closed, so we headed downtown. To my surprise, he had never been to Gritty McDuffs. So, that was my suggestion.

Gritty's has been part of Portland's microbrewery scene for so long that it pre-dates the usual suspects in the local craft beer community. It is also the home pub for Maine Spurs (an overseas supporters club for an English soccer team). The fact that it focuses almost exclusively on British-style beers that are brewed onsite and, famously, year-round cask ales makes it something of an outlier in terms of the end drinking community it attracts.

Anyone who has been to the Portland Gritty's will be very aware that its owners are very proud of the beer brewed and the community created. The bar is not alone in welcoming different

communities at the same time — beer + soccer is an optimization strategy that is being replicated throughout the entirety of New England, for instance — but it becomes clearer when you acknowledge how important the craft beer industry is to Maine.

The latest figures from the Brewers Association show that we have 158 Craft Breweries. In 2024 (the last year for which the BA has full numbers, according to its website), these companies cumulatively produced 349,555 barrels of beer, which equates to around 9.8 gallons per 21+ adult Mainer.

That is a lot of beer. For context, Anheuser-Busch InBev (Budweiser's owners) release an average of 91 million barrels into the North American marketplace alone most years. The majority of that is the household names that we have come to love and loathe — delete as appropriate — but the brewing behemoth does have a craft beer sub-division amongst its logos.

Marketed as part of ABI's "Brewer's Collective" unit, this includes acquired craft breweries like Goose Island, Elysian, Golden Road, Wicked Weed, Karbach, Devils Backbone, and Four Peaks. In 2022, this unit produced 2.65 million barrels across all of its craft beer brands.

The caveat is that craft is not, according to various media sources, a high priority for ABI; the company sold eight well-known craft beer brands to Canadian cannabis company Tilray for \$85 million in 2023. That left them with what can be considered to be a relatively small craft beer footprint for a global beverage brand.

Despite shedding some of the beers that would be familiar to the wider craft community, ABI does retain an interest in producing styles that would not be out-of-place in an independent taproom. A recent article published on the VinePair website even said that the company's craft beer brands are "finally good enough" to be consumed by the craft beer community. If that sounds like a compliment, it isn't.

A decade ago, there was a significant amount of independent acquisition by the Beer Big Boys. This led to a certain level of confusion as to what craft beer was — small, niche, and experimental for independent breweries, or part of a calculated assault on the community by the companies with wads of cash to spend on marketing a product that was craft in name only.

Most of the local or small brewers were, the article said, "relatively sanguine" at the time about the larger brands encroaching onto their turf, but fast forward to today and it seems that selling anyone who sold their craft beer (and, by association, its community) to a company with limitless pockets has ushered in a world where "good enough" is, well, merely good enough.



Photo By Mike Lianza

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This becomes even more worrying when you factor in the continuing decline in craft beer sales, the changing habits of end drinkers, and the reported increase in brewery closures or mergers. If this sounds like a dystopian vision of a potential craft beer future, then it doesn't bode well for the community.

It is well known that the craft beer industry has experienced a slight downturn in the last couple of years, much of which can be attributed to market saturation and economic forces. In addition, a focus by brewers to develop extreme versions of the styles that grew the community in the first place hasn't helped; the hoppiest IPAs, the sweetest stouts, sourest sours and the most bizarre pairings possible (anyone who has tasted a peanut-butter stout with hints of coffee, pineapple and chocolate orange will know what I am talking about).

This has led to what people in the industry are calling the "Great Re-Balancing." Consumers are, insiders say, tired of chasing novelty. Instead, they want quality, end drinkability and, critically, value.

A recent industry report identified five distinct trends. These were a lager revolution (beer-flavored beer, apparently), an IPA correction (the return of West Coast flavors, an increase in session options as opposed to the high ABV Hazy), premium value beers (a rejection of mediocre \$9 pints in favor of something local that is worth the price, even if that is \$11), a non-alcoholic alternative, and a hyper-local vs hyper-global beer menu. Common wisdom tells us that identifying trends is how market researchers justify their existence/salaries, with consumer-generated data (as opposed to real-world engagement) often behind their predictions.

Hyper-local and hyper-global would certainly tap into the roots and desires of the craft beer community, even if it sounds like a contradiction.

Simply put, it is pairing the brewery down the street or in a neighboring town — supporting local companies is vital for the community — with classic, authentic imports. Craft beer fans want to drink local, but have no problem with switching to a true German Helles or a pint of imported Fullers London Pride on draught, the report said. For the record, this is probably the part of the community that I currently identify with.

The shift towards the potential re-balancing is driven by a craft beer drinker with mature tastes who is aware of persistent economic pressures and a desire to retain the social experiences that attracted them to the community in the first place, the report said. In other words, they want their preferred drinks sector to understand not only the power of community but also the value that it brings to their lives.

All of these tangential and data-filled musings bring me back to my time with the esteemed and knowledgeable Mr. Cutler. Out of the many beer drinkers and brewers that I know (and I seem to know a lot, according to my virtual Rolodex), he is the one person that I feel most comfortable with sharing my industry concerns or recurring British-ale thoughts with.

Jeff and I have been friends for around 15 years, and I always enjoy hanging out with him. Conversation never flags when we meet, so when the brewer heard us chatting about the state of the craft beer industry in Maine and beyond, he asked if we wanted to see behind the curtain. For two certified members of the craft beer community, that was a no-brainer.

We went downstairs, smelt the fermenting yeast, looked in the tanks, and took pictures of the set-up. It was small, perfect for the space, and definitely a microbrewery. In every sense of the word.

A week later, I had to go to Cambridge, MA, to do some "research" ... which basically means hitting up out-of-state taprooms that either use Maine malt or which have a deep appreciation of our specific segment of the New England craft beer community.

Lamplighter is an excellent local brewery which used Blue Ox malt for a long while, but has switched since I was there last. Somerville's Remnant, which can definitely trace its lineage back to the home-brew revolution, is producing beers that the local community loves. Both are operating in a marketplace where community with a capital C is the differentiator.

These two breweries (Cambridge and the Greater Boston area is well-served for taprooms, just so you know) are busy during the day and doing a brisk trade at night.

Both offer an excellent (and seasonal) beer menu, with an extensive selection of coffee options and barista service. The bartenders know the products intimately and will happily provide the customer with a seemingly endless supply of tastings. That would seem to be an obvious strategy but I can certainly think of some places where you don't get offered that option.

There is normally a community event every night (trivia, movie screening, knitting or book club, if the flyers on the wall were any indication), and they benefit hugely from having zero TVs. In a world where sports is constantly cited as a reason as to why people go to a bar to socialize, it is refreshing to see that the owners of these breweries prefer to let their beer do the talking ... which inevitably generates its own set of conversations among both the locals and beer tourists.



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These are exactly the sort of road-trips that I enjoy. Localization is a universal concept, and the craft beer industry is no exception. Anchoring a brewery to a local identity and a community connection emphasizes a commitment to sustainability and beer that is locally-made rather than mass produced. Industry data shows that more than 60% of craft beer drinkers cite local breweries as a crucial factor in their purchasing decisions, generating a “sense of place” and ownership.

If that number is accurate (and there is no reason to believe that it isn't), then it shows just how vital the concept of community is to the beer industry. There is a consensus among brewers that it acts as not only the foundational social glue but also the driver of success. Which is not a surprise to those of us that have been part of this global club for more than two decades.

A brewery is more than just a production facility, often functioning

as a community hub that generates connection, support and shared identity. Adding events and appealing to both local drinkers and visitors is part of the overall experience, breaking down social barriers and acknowledging the shared values or authenticity that drew people to the craft beer community in the first place.

It took me a while to fully acknowledge how much I associate my sense of self with the craft beer community. The callow youth that preferred mass-produced lager over beers with diverse flavor profiles and styles would likely add me to his point-and-laugh list, but if my DeLorean's flux capacitor wasn't permanently broken, then I would get behind the wheel and head back to 1986 to point him in the right end drinking direction.

Plato famously said that it was a wise man who invented beer. When you think about the community that attaches itself to the values and collective pull of craft beer, it is very hard to disagree. ●



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