

Meet The Man Behind He'Brew, A Line Of Beer For Jews

Nov 13, 2019

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"There's a beer for everyone. We should have our own beer."

This was the thinking that led a young Californian by the name of Jeremy Cowan to start Shmaltz, a brewing company that famously produces a line of beers that play on Jewish culture. The company makes Pastrami Pilsner, Funky Jewbelation, and Chanukah Hanukkah Pass The Beer, a dark ale brewed with chocolate.

Since founding Shmaltz in 1996, Cowan has been involved in several other brands, including Coney Island Brewing Company — which he sold to Boston Beer Company in 2013 — and 518 Craft, which takes advantage of the New York State Farm Brewery License and uses ingredients from Upstate New York. Currently, 518 Craft has a taproom in Troy, New York, where they release a variety of special and one-off beers.

Kenny Gould: Where are you from?

Jeremy Cowan: I grew up in Northern California, in the suburbs south of San Francisco. This was pre-Silicon Valley — there weren't a lot of venture capitalists or internet startups. One day, my group of friends and I were messing around in Menlo Park. We were a group of guys who watched a lot of Blazing Saddles and Caddyshack. We were like, "You know who needs their own beer? The Jews." We thought there was a lot of shtick that could go with that. "Don't pass out, Passover." And so on. We really had fun with it. It was an inside joke. We never thought it was going to be real.

KG: When did the joke become a company?

JC: Fast forward half a generation and I was with my significant other's family in Cleveland, which has a big Jewish community. Her dad was a bit of an entrepreneur himself. We started joking about it. We said, "There are a lot of weddings and bar mitzvahs and circumcisions. If we made a beer for those occasions, maybe people would get a kick out of it." But at the time, I had a full time day job in San Francisco. I said, "I can't do this. It's a terrible idea. I need a career and a job and I need to be responsible." But you know, sometimes good ideas or even not good ones but pretty satisfying shtick gets stuck in your mental craw. I just started thinking about it more and more. I got curious about what it would take to make a small batch, high quality holiday beer.

KG: This was at a time in the industry when starting a craft brewery wasn't so popular.

JC: It was the mid-1990s. Craft beer was crashing. And I had so little experience that I didn't know enough to realize what was going on. So I started. The shtick worked well as a first punch line. Then people realized I was taking the beer seriously. The guy who did my original recipes went onto be the brewer for the entire Pyramid Group. I was contracting with a brewery called Anderson Valley Brewing Company, which had been named one of the top breweries in the world two years in a row. That really got it off the ground.

KG: Did you quit your day job?

JC: I was just reading about people who haven't quit their day jobs but are working in craft. But I wasn't one of them. I quit. There's a lot of us who, over the years, for better or for worse, quit our day jobs and just went for it. For 23 years, I desperately tried to make it work. For five years, I drove around the country and sold beer door to door.



That was a fantastic way to get to know the country, and the beer world. We ended up being able to use the shtick and make some really unique beers during the growth of extreme beer. We've got some wonderful styles that make our brand stand out in terms of quality as well as the punchlines.

KG: For most of your career, you used other peoples' equipment to make your beer. Then you opened a brewery, but I know that last year, you sold it to SingleCut Beersmiths. Was that something you intended from the beginning, or did you overreach and need to backtrack?

JC: We built the brewery because in '10, '11, and '12, there wasn't much capacity to go around. We were at around 9,000 barrels and thinking, Where could we go if we needed capacity? There wasn't Two Roads or Beltway. These contract places didn't exist. Also, our portfolio was getting more complicated, using different types of yeast and barrels. So it worked out really well. We built the brewery in Upstate New York and got to the next stage. But at the same time, everyone had been growing 50 to 100 percent per year. In '14, '15, '16, '17, '18, a thousand breweries per year were opening. We went to about 30,000 barrels, but it was a lot of contract brewing for other people. I felt like I was scrambling to run someone else's factory for them. That was never my intention. I was supposed to be bouncing back and forth and focusing on marketing, and I was spending all my time on operations and logistics. That wasn't what I wanted to do. I was supposed to be bouncing back and forth between East and West coasts and focusing on sales and marketing. SingleCut, who bought the facility, is a great company. The facility fits their model. Now I can go back to contract brewing and work with another world class brewery — we're brewing everything at Captain Lawrence. Now I can go back to the stuff that I love, the stuff I find more compelling than running a factory. That wasn't my dream. I did it out of necessity.

KG: What's next?

JC: The brewery deal closed in 2018 and we had a bunch of transition stuff that took a year to finish the full handover to SingleCut. A lot of what's coming out now — new packaging, new styles, a lot of brands are in cans — that has happened in a very short time period. On the Shmaltz side, we have a bunch of new holiday beers coming out. For next year, we have a pretty good structure in place with production at Captain Lawrence and two new wholesalers in New York. We also have Alphabet City Brewing, which I took over from some friends of mine in New York. They did a great job of establishing a fun brand in the East Village. They were home brewers on 7th Street and Avenue A. We've rebranded the whole thing. I also started an Upstate New York brand for our farm license called 518 Craft, which is all New York State ingredients tied into the Upstate geography. We just do special release beers for that. And we have a licensing agreement with CBS for a line of Star Trek branded beers. We did the 50th Anniversary and the original series. Next year, it'll be tied into Discovery. So a lot of things going on, but at the end of the day, we're still a small company focused on making super high quality, interesting, innovative beers while also trying to keep up with fun branding.