

Local Breweries Collaborate on Black is Beautiful Stout

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Independence Day is not normally a time when a beer lover would reach for a rich, velvety imperial stout. Roasted notes of chocolate and heavy spice seem better paired with a piece of gingerbread at Christmas, not usually as an option to wash down backyard barbecue, grilled hot dogs and creamy sweet-tart coleslaw.

But nothing is normal about 2020 and the lack of regularity is a prime opportunity for people to experiment and push the limits on what is considered acceptable. In the beer community, that comes in the form of a collaborative brewing project called Black is Beautiful, a deep and malty beer based on a recipe from Weathered Souls Brewing Company, based in San Antonio, Texas. The beer recipe is offered on the blackisbeautiful.beer website for any brewery to reproduce and adapt to their own style, with the caveat that proceeds from the sale of the beer be donated to organizations that do work beneficial to the African-American community.

Locally, Black is Beautiful imperial stout is being produced at Rare Form Brewing Company with Shmaltz Brewing Company (both in Troy), Indian Ladder Farms Cidery and Brewery (Altamont) and Bound By Fate Brewing (Schuylerville). Kevin Mullen, owner of Rare Form, said that the four breweries each contributed ingredients they had on hand to stay true to the Weathered Souls recipe and each brewery will have one barrel of beer (about 31 gallons) to sell at their taprooms. Beneficiaries chosen by the breweries includes the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Troy's YWCA. Mullen said that heavy, dark beers are not the best sellers in summer, but, "because of the cause, it will sell the beer."

Paul Leone, executive director for the New York State Brewers Association (NYSBA), said that Black is Beautiful is a way to support and bring light to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has seen renewed traction in the wake of George Floyd's death. "Craft beer drinkers are always looking for new or unique beer styles and they also tend to be very civic minded, which makes charitable collaborations a perfect way for breweries to get a unique beer out and support a cause they believe in," Leone said. Of New York's 462 breweries, he estimated that 30 are currently making Black is Beautiful with more planning to do so in coming months.

Black is Beautiful imperial stout is slated for release just ahead of Independence Day and is available only at the taprooms of the participating breweries. Other regional breweries also plan to produce and release People Power, a lager recipe from Threes Brewing in Brooklyn, which was originally launched in 2018 to benefit the ACLU.

While the style of the beer is a little on the nose, the visual reference to blackness is a way for people to understand current social issues beyond reading the news. It is an imbibable lesson on race in America. It also highlights the stark racial disparities of beer production and consumption: A 2014 Nielsen survey found that African-American buyers only accounted for 3.7% of craft beer sales, while a marketing study by Experian Marketing Services that same year said that of 2,019 African-Americans surveyed, only 23% drank domestic beer and 6% drank craft beer.

Weathered Souls is owned by Marcus Baskerville, one of the few black brewers in America. An August 2019 report from the diversity committee for the Brewers Association found that 88% of brewery owners surveyed were white; 3.5% of nonproduction brewery staff (like marketing, sales and service professionals) were black. The survey also found that as few as 50 of the 8,400 breweries in America had black owners. "As an industry we know we need to do more with diversity and



Some of the local breweries' staff included in the area Black is Beautiful stout collaboration: Back row, left to right: Jeremy Cowan, founder/owner, Shmaltz Brewing Company; Brett Demler, co-founder/owner, Bound By Fate Brewing Company; Kevin Mullen, founder/owner, Rare Form Brewing Company. Front row, left to right: Peter John Ferrebee, assistant, Rare Form; Verena Paprot, brewing intern, Rare Form. Not pictured: Scott Veltman, head brewer, Indian Ladder Farms Cidery and Brewery Provided, Rare Form Brewing Company

inclusion," said Leone, who noted that NYSBA now has an active inclusivity committee which is working to address the issue. At Rare Form, Mullen said he is working with Schenectady County Community College's brewing program to train aspiring brewers through a minority-based scholarship program.

Historically, enslaved people were active in producing beer, based on documentation from slave-owning households across early America. A recent story in Food and Wine magazine profiled the brewing ingenuity of Peter Hemmings, a slave owned by Thomas Jefferson.

Black is Beautiful also pays homage via its name to the history of the term, which was first documented in an 1858 speech by John S. Rock, a Black abolitionist and lawyer, but was popularized a century later by activists to counter the idea that African natural features were inherently unattractive.