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Seven Reasons To Cheer The Year In Beer



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Food & Drink

I cover the business of beer and alcohol, mixed with a little politics



Steamboat, CO, 2020 -- Mountain Tap Brewing has repurposed old gondolas for socially distanced ...

[+] MOUNTAIN TAP BREWING

You don't need me to tell you that this year has devastated a staggering number of people and businesses.

On top of putting the lives of tens of millions of food-and-drink professionals at [acute risk](#), the COVID pandemic has eviscerated [3.4 million](#)

jobs in the leisure and hospitality sector, **closed 17% of US restaurants** permanently or for the long-term (as of December 1), and completely **upended supply and sales chains** for alcoholic beverage producers of all sizes. Further, the months-long protests of this spring and summer detonated a fierce and sometimes violent reckoning over racial justice centuries in the making and playing out in the brewery workspaces and taprooms of today.

But as they say, necessity is the mother of invention. Brewery owners and employees, among so many others, showed that the **resilience and innovation** that birthed the American craft beer movement remains alive and well, even in the wake of so much tragedy. This year, meritorious brewers and their associates accepted an onslaught of new realities and ... yes ... pivoted. So whether we're talking about the accelerated adaptation of a tech-based business tool or more Black and brown writers covering beer, 2020 may actually come to be viewed as a year that changed brewing for the better.



Cape May Airport, New Jersey, Spring 2020 -- A Cape May Brewing employee loads up a van to deliver ... [+] CAPE MAY BREWING

Packaging, To-Go and Delivery

Immediately after the pandemic shut down bars and breweries around the world, smart thinkers rushed to put draft beer into cans and crowlers to slow the liquid from spoiling. Without the ability to sell to places where people drink on-site — including within their own taprooms — brewers needed to get existing beer into drinkers' homes as fast as possible.

As the uncertainty of the pandemic came into clearer focus, those who could turned to liquor, grocery, and convenience stores, along with gas stations, to move their packaged product. Breweries with existing off-premises relationships loaded those accounts up with cans, and some breweries that follow the taproom model opened up some of these accounts for the first time. With off-premises purchasing booming during the pandemic, it was the best they could do with a bad situation. Many even surprised themselves with sales increases.

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Thanks to the swift but temporary easing of restrictions in most states, breweries handed and trucked supply directly out the door by selling it curbside and [delivering straight to customers' houses](#). Together with a new — again temporary — ability for bars and restaurants in most states to sell to-go drinks, and in some cases, let those buyers [carry and sip from open containers](#) in designated districts in municipalities like Atlantic City, a vastly

lower number of breweries closed than initially anticipated. Breweries have also kept innumerable employees on the payroll by putting them to work in packaging and retail operations.

Though temporarily relaxed states like New Jersey [may well go back to their old prohibitive ways](#) once the pandemic threat subsides, consumers in my state of residence will likely continue to amp up their use of existing online platforms like Drizly, which process orders for delivery from local liquor stores. Though we can't do it here in the Garden State, just across the Delaware River, [Pennsylvanians can order beer](#) from a service like GoPuff, which pre-purchases and stores products direct from breweries and delivers them to customers at home.

According to my Forbes colleague Chris Furnari, online alcohol delivery services in the United States were [predicted to make \\$5.6 billion this year](#). That's 80% more than last year.

E-Commerce and Direct-to-Consumer Shipping

When it comes to direct custom shipping to customers, the wine world has got it all over beer. Thanks in part to wineries' more concentrated lobbying efforts, most states allow at least some wineries to use this "direct-to-consumer" or "DTC" sales model. Half a dozen states, including California, allow breweries to [ship beer to its residents](#), while the vast majority, like New Jersey, let their citizens receive wine directly from both in- and out-of-state wineries [but no beer in the mail](#) whatsoever unless it comes from an authorized retailer (read: not a producer).

But pandemic lockdowns have finally [focused brewers' attention](#) on the disparity and the necessity. With Craft Beer & Brewing magazine reporting \$3 billion in revenue from 2019 DTC wine shipments, it's time for them to catch up. And with Congress finally [passing permanent excise tax reform](#) this month, I predict brewers' guilds and trade associations will now take this up with a vengeance.

Wholesalers, however, will oppose this with everything they've got. Stay tuned.

Brewers already have one high-profile, politically active advocate who can attest to the need for loosened DTC laws: Natalie Cilurzo, co-founder of Russian River Brewing in Sonoma County. When Cilurzo and her partner closed their pubs to the public in March to comply with lockdown orders, they immediately started selling beer through their online store (which had been set up to sell non-alcoholic merchandise) and boxing it up by hand to satisfy the thousands of orders that poured in from around California.

Though she hears a lot of whining from people outside the state who can't get Russian River beer mail, her fans in the far reaches of California are grateful that for once they can try the limited beers that normally only sell on-site. And for the first time ever, the brewery will sell bottles of its coveted once-a-year release, Pliny the Younger, [exclusively online](#), in late January. Normally, craft beer lovers fly in from all over the world to wait in line literally all day to sample what's usually a draft-only triple IPA.

"While we are sad to miss seeing our loyal friends and fans," Cilurzo writes on the brewery's blog, "There are some silver linings gained through this whole experience of navigating business and life during a year filled with seemingly endless challenges.... When we started selling online direct to consumer out of necessity, you responded more positively than we ever imagined, and continue to reorder to this day!"

Beer sales consultant Julie Rhodes doubles down on Cilurzo's pro-DTC sentiment. "This is not a fad," she told attendees of an online conference in early December. "Breweries have to embrace e-commerce and they have to do it now."

Changed Product Mix

Some larger craft brewers, already facing damaging headwinds from all kinds of emerging competitors, decided last year to trim their annual beer offerings. Rather than constantly brewing a different seasonal or one-off to keep up with the cool young kids on their blocks, breweries like Green Flash prepared for 2020 by paring down their lineups and refocusing attention on core brands.

When the pandemic hit, many smaller breweries followed suit ... to an extent. Instead of loading recipes up with expensive adjunct ingredients, they turned to what they figured would **sell, sell quickly, and sell in any type of weather**: familiar and easy-to-find flagships, hazy IPAs (because IPA) and easier-drinking styles like lagers and low-alcohol or low-calorie session ales.

Breweries that rely on their tasting rooms for a bulk of sales did and do continue to rotate in variants to keep peripatetic customers coming back. But they mostly do that by putting out, you guessed it ... more hazy IPAs.

Some breweries have determined that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, and are releasing seltzers and kombuchas for the first time. This not only diversifies their portfolio to meet more drinkers where they're going, it also takes advantage of the tanks under-capacity breweries would normally be using to make beer.



Denver, 2020 -- Odell has converted a shipping container into patio seating to maintain social ... [+] ODELL BREWING

Outdoor Space

I like to joke that the first plane ride I take in 2021 will bring me straight to Steamboat, Colorado's Mountain Tap Brewery, which has repurposed three out-of-use gondolas into outdoor seating pods designed to socially distance people from outside one's party. [Shipping containers](#), like the ones put into service by Southern California's Brewjeria and Odell Brewing's RiNo location in Denver, have also found renewed purpose this way.

The concept of a beer garden has also gained new life in a world where spending too much time indoors might kill you. Even without fanciful seating arrangements, breweries have converted their parking lots; expanded and beautified the spaces outside their buildings; and, in examples like New Jersey's Little Dog Brewing and Bolero Snort Brewery, have received short-term licenses and blessings from neighbors to put

tables, chairs and sometimes tents and heat lamps on adjacent lots, alleyways, sidewalks and streets.

I laud Philadelphia authorities for letting certain neighborhoods claim their streets for seating. Reminiscing about a nice October evening spent drinking Pennsylvania beers at a table placed on the closed-to-vehicle-traffic road outside Fergie's Pub in Center City, I lament how much we take for granted all of the space we waste. Sitting in the street (AKA the gutter, as my mom curiously calls it in situations like these), has become one of my favorite activities. I hope local officials keep letting this be a thing.

Collaboration

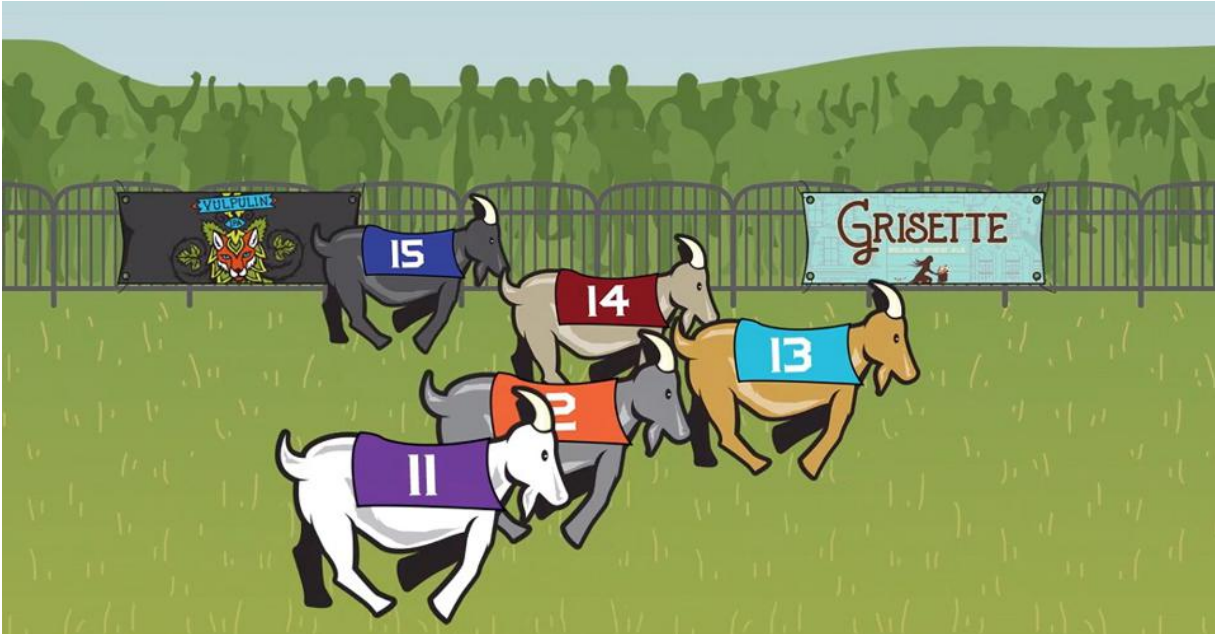
The ideal of collaboration over competition irrevocably shapes the craft beer ethos, and professional brewers demonstrably started putting it into play about ten years ago by making and selling one-off beers with their professional brewer friends. In 2017, Natalie Cilurzo invented the idea of a worldwide charity collaboration when her Sonoma Pride campaign raised more than \$1 million for Northern California wildfire relief.

So collaborations aren't new. But they are getting more attention.

This year, Black is Beautiful, launched by Weathered Souls Brewing in San Antonio, made major news for months as the first worldwide collaboration beer to raise money for organizations working toward racial equity. Toward the beginning of the pandemic, Brooklyn's Other Half Brewing signed up 855 breweries in all 50 states and 53 countries to brew [All Together IPA](#), whose proceeds benefited hospitality workers who lost their jobs because of the crisis.

And in Durham, North Carolina, Durty Bull Brewing gathered a large handful of neighboring breweries this spring to take collective orders and payments through a single e-commerce site and set up an assembly line of

employees from the respective businesses to provide touchless curbside pickup, all in one spot.



Phoenixville, PA, May 2020 -- Sly Fox Brewing created a virtual version of its annual goat race and ...

[+] SLY FOX BREWING

Virtual Events

Before the pandemic, I'd advocated for more breweries to host interactive video tastings and meet-and-greets with key personnel. Now that's pretty much the only way to do it. Without the safe ability to travel or gather, conference planners, festival producers, social facilitators, breweries and hops brokers are deep diving into virtual events. In my opinion, it's fabulous.

Personally, I've emceed, spoken at and attended virtual versions of the Brewers Association's Craft Brewers Conference (originally scheduled for Austin, Texas), the Craft Beer Expo (normally held in Louisville, Kentucky), the [Beer Culture Summit](#) (usually in Chicago) and the always-online Craft Beer Professionals conferences, all without leaving the comfort of my basement office or my outside-the-frame yoga pants. It's a bummer to miss out on the networking and, okay, partying, these conferences provide but the better platforms that host them incorporate virtual break-out meeting rooms, after-hours happy hours and even trade show floors for sponsors.

What's more, incredible speakers and participants have tuned in from around the world, sometimes checking in from the middle of their night. It's true that some organizers, like the Brewers Association and Brewbound, have [lost a majority of their revenue](#) because of [cancelled events](#). However, some of these conferences wouldn't have been able to afford to fly these esteemed guests in to appear in person.

For my own purposes at least, I consider this a net win and hope that future in-person events will retain a video component for people who aren't attending IRL.

Yet it's one thing to stage a conference online and another thing entirely to [produce a virtual beer festival](#), which in the "before times" represented a face-to-face gathering of people who wander from booth to booth to taste beer, buy food, and listen to music. With little notice, the Fresh Fest Beer Fest for Black brewers, drinkers and artists [transitioned to "Digi Fest,"](#) complete with several channels of music and presentations, and the Hop Culture media company is [owning the virtual beer-party circuit](#), going so far as to host a second Saturday morning digital [breakfast-beer](#) fest in February 2021.

These festivals, along with most others, arrange or sell a beer box to go with the festivities. Of course, those beers can be tough to get if the breweries are out-of-area, but Hop Culture, for one, has put together a beer box that its retail partner can ship to ticket holders in 30 states.

The North American Guild of Beer Writers has also found a way around that hurdle ... sort of. Before each of its myriad educational happy hours, the group wires \$5 to each registered attendee to purchase a local beer for the occasion.

It's the perfect reason for me to visit the teeny tiny Eclipse Brewing about five miles from my house, owned by a lovely middle-aged couple who, I've just learned, are hosting beer trivia nights. Every month. Online.

It sounds fun. I may “go.” I’m not sure why.

I’ve never gone to a brewery for trivia before. But there’s something about local beer, yoga pants, friendly acquaintances and my basement couch that sounds very appealing ...

Black Lives Matter

Celeste Beatty opened Harlem Brewing as the first Black brewery owner in the country in 2000. Since then, fewer than 100 Black-owned breweries have taken their place across the American landscape, and some number of BIPOC beer lovers have joined the ranks as employees. But in the mostly whitewashed world of craft beer, they — and their interests and concerns — have remained largely invisible.

Black and brown people in beer had [started to gain a bit of mainstream craft attention](#) thanks in part to events like Fresh Fest, grants like the North American Guild of Beer Writers Diversity in Beer Writing Grant and celebrated hires like J. Jackson-Beckham as the Brewers Association’s first diversity “ambassador.” But in my view, it wasn’t until this year that awareness of BIPOCs in beer hit a critical mass.

BIPOC beer experts seem to be getting asked to speak at conferences more often — both about race and other topics. Journalists of color are responding to newly awakened editors’ fervent calls to submit story ideas, while those same editors are asking all writers to add more BIPOC names to their source lists. Non-white owners and activists are making news for [bringing more people who look like them into beer](#), and individuals, universities and organizations are awarding scholarships and internships to recipients from underserved communities to study and practice brewing and beer writing.

A lot of breweries have fielded criticism for virtue signaling by failing to take meaningful action toward equity other than maybe brewing Black is

Beautiful and posting #BlackLivesMatter on their social media pages. Fortunately, others, like New Belgium Brewing and Stone Brewing, truly are stepping up, unearthing their unconscious biases, bringing in diversity consultants to revamp their workplace cultures, and taking concrete action to create a welcoming space for the entire community.

After a year like 2020, I think that's what we all need most.

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