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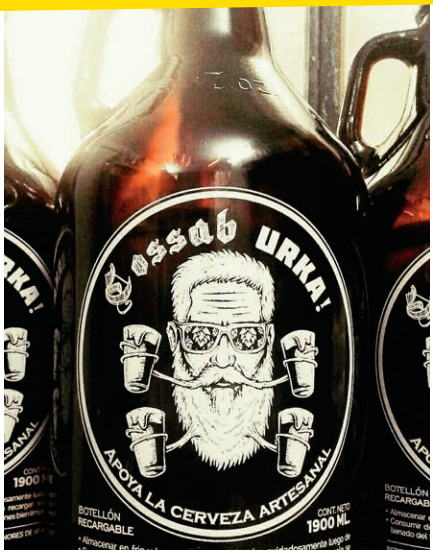
Berlina AL PASO
BREWERY BERLINA PATAGONIA

ARGENTINA NEVER TOO MANY COOKS

BY EFRAÍN VILLA



"Honestly, it's too late for me to start homebrewing," says 24-year-old Martín Bohm. "Trends are very short-lived in Argentina, and I think I missed this one. We Argentinians are exaggeratedly passionate people, and we don't really do anything unless we go all in and do it big, which means there is always the next big thing. Getting into homebrewing now would be like when old people go to nightclubs. Sometimes, you just have to know when you have shown up too late for something and move on."

Bohm lives in Buenos Aires and works at Cossab Brewpub, which he refers to as "one of the ancient veterans of brewing in Argentina." In reality, the establishment has been open for 17 years, but in this ultra-fashionable mega-metropolis of 14 million inhabitants, fierce competition and exorbitant real estate prices mean that entrepreneurial legacies are often measured in months rather than years.

While Argentinian homebrewers, craft beer entrepreneurs, and brewing suppliers desperately try to persuade a finicky domestic market, and themselves, that craft beer in Argentina is here to stay, Bohm and many other Argentinians are not convinced.

Despite some skepticism, brewing is increasingly popular in Buenos Aires as it is in the countryside. Craft beer has been a bright spot in an otherwise bleak economic outlook for this second-largest country in South America. Economists credit pent-up demand for craft beer as the driving force bolstering growth in the lackluster beer market. Recent statistical analyses show that craft beer sales are increasing by as much as 40 percent per year even though they make up less than 2 percent of national beer sales.

The growth in this subsector has been so rapid that politicians have begun considering craft beer in their campaign platforms. During the 2017 election for national senate, then-candidate Esteban Bullrich said one way Argentina could pull itself out of current and future economic slumps was for laid-off Argentinians to open up breweries. He also said Argentina needed more young people to become drone pilots, which set him up for derision as an out-of-touch panderer trying to score points in a popularity contest.[1]

"It should not be about following the herd," laments Bohm. "People used to drive six hours each way to taste the beer where I work because when they started brewing, there weren't many other brewers. That's all changed. Three years ago, there were no microbreweries in my neighborhood. Two years ago, there was one. Now there are fifteen!"

Although Bohm is likely not old enough to personally remember the rapid rise and fall of the *parripollo*—once-fashionable grilled chicken greasy spoons—the phenomenon was so intense that the *"parripollo effect,"* as it was later coined, has become part of the Argentinian ethos. It is not uncommon to see talking heads on television having spirited discussions about the need for entrepreneurs to "save themselves from the matchstick flash," alluding to the practice of quickly divesting from a business founded on a boom-and-bust model.

When exploring the roots of the *parripollo effect,* experts and laymen alike frequently reference Argentina's tumultuous past as the reason for their mercurial markets. After exhausting the empirical evidence that demonstrates that Argentina has always been a country of extremes where superlatives reign supreme, conversations usually end with a sigh followed by the statement: "I guess in Argentina we're just too damn passionate."

OUT OF THE ASHES: BEER

"In a weird way, Argentina's disasters have set the stage for the craft beer boom," says Fernando Aguiar, a homebrewer and spokesperson for Somos Cerveceros, Argentina's craft brewing and homebrewing association.

Eighteen years ago, while the world was ringing in a new millennium, Argentina was in the throes of a great depression that would not stabilize until 2003. Scenes

Photos © Getty/AdonisVillanueva; courtesy of Cerveza Berlina; Gisela Munafó; Martin Bohm

of riots erupting as the president fled the grand federal palace in a helicopter still haunt the country's collective conscience. In the wake of the government collapse, regulatory attempts to balance trade deficits translated into lower caps on imported goods.

"During that crisis, and for a long time after, people had a hard time accessing imports of any sort," says Aguiar. "That included brewers not being able to get their hands on equipment or brewing supplies. But it also launched a new era of entrepreneurship in Argentina in which we realized we could, and should, do things ourselves. We started rigging our own brewing systems and we became innovators. We've always been agriculturalists, but there was a renewed interest in growing our own malt and barley to get back to making our own beer. Sometimes you have to go through the hard times to get to the good."

Presently, 4.5 million tons of barley are produced per year in Argentina, making the country one of the world's primary barley exporters according to Cerveceros Argentinos, a coalition of beer corporations, barley growers, and malt producers.

BIG BEER'S BIG BACKFIRE

As has been common in many countries, when craft beer started growing in Argentina, Big Beer tried to get in on the action. "Industrial breweries tried buying out artisanal breweries, and when that didn't go so well, they launched their own fake craft beer brands," says Aguiar. "They heavily marketed these fake craft beers as a different product from the industrial beers that Argentinians had always known."

Although many of the country's biggest publications continue to run ads with beer labels purported to be craft beer, not everyone buys the corporate spin. In a scathing blog entry posted on May 5, 2015 on a popular Argentinian craft beer website, Robert Shumann decried the audacity of multinational beer corporations offering their own products as "alternatives" to Big Beer in Argentina.[2]

In the essay, Shumann detailed the many ways in which the players in Argentina's beer duopoly, which already controls nearly 100 percent of the market, deliberately "disguise" their brands as craft products.

"I know industrial beer companies are just looking to make a profit and that we little guys have always been a rock in their shoe," says Nacho Ortiz, a nanobrewer in the Buenos Aires suburb of Luján. "But because of their heavy marketing of craft products, even if they are fake craft products, people now realize there is such a thing as beer choice and that has changed everything."

Ortiz remembers that ten years ago it was much harder to be a homebrewer. "When I started brewing in 2008, I could not easily find ingredients or brewing equipment," says Ortiz. "I was planting my own hops, and I used to use an aquarium pump to oxygenate my wort. Now I can get anything and turn my passion into my business because Argentinians are becoming discerning beer drinkers. Whether we acknowledge it or not, industrialized beer producers had a role in that because they invested in marketing campaigns that we little guys could have never launched."

Ortiz believes cultural shifts and the willingness of young people to try new things also contributed to the current craft beer boom. "The wine industry started trying to attract a more upscale market by making itself out to be an elitist sector," says Ortiz. "This drove many Argentinians to get into beer. We've always been a country of wine drinkers, but that's changing."

IPA ARGENTA

Argentine-style IPA
Recipe courtesy Daniel Rodriguez

Batch Size: 5 US gallons (18.9 L)
Original Gravity: 1.062 (15.1° P)
Final Gravity: 1.012 (3.1° P)
Alcohol: 6.5% by volume
Color: 5 SRM
Bitterness: 60 IBU

MALTS

10.1 lb.	(4.6 kg) Pilsner malt
11 oz.	(300 g) wheat malt
7 oz.	(200 g) biscuit malt
7 oz.	(200 g) dextrin malt

HOPS

0.95 oz.	(27 g) Victoria, 13.3% a.a. @ 60 min
0.88 oz.	(25 g) Cascade, 7% a.a. @ 10 min
1.06 oz.	(30 g) Bullion, 9.5% a.a. @ 0 min
1.06 oz.	(30 g) Cascade, 7% a.a. @ 0 min
1.06 oz.	(30 g) Cascade, 7% a.a., dry hop 4 days
1.06 oz.	(30 g) Victoria, 13.3% a.a., dry hop 4 days

YEAST

Fermentis SafAle US-05

BREWING NOTES

Single-step infusion mash at 151° F (66° C) for 60 minutes. Ferment at 66° F (19° C).

SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

"We've always been a country of sharers, it's in our DNA, and that's not changing," says Guido Ferrari, one of the three brothers who starred in Nat Geo's reality show, *The Barons of Beer.*

When the program premiered in 2016, the mainstream reach of cable television, amplified by social media, brought the concept of Argentinian craft brewing to urban and rural audiences. For the first time, Argentinian television watchers were treated to *I Love Lucy*–style hijinks set in a homegrown brewery. Intermingled with scenes of hops fields and vats of wort, there were shots of Patagonian lakes, majestic volcanoes, and fireside philosophical conversations on how to best grill *asado* (Argentinian barbecue). Everything about the program's backdrop reinforced the notion that craft beer had become a contemporary Argentinian artifact.

"The program did a lot to promote craft beer in this country, even though craft beer was already popular and things were changing," says Ferrari. "I think the whole reason Nat Geo approached us is because they saw some authenticity in our endeavors. The reality show format has its tropes,

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but I think Nat Geo did a good job of showing what happens in a brewery day-in, day-out."

Ferrari points out that being thrust into the spotlight and sharing so much personal information about his family and their business has not changed how beer is brewed at Berlina, the family's third brewpub. "The only thing that changed is that it augmented our brand," Ferrari says. "But it's not like after the show we set up a mega factory in some industrial park in Buenos Aires and now we all drive Audis."

In terms of what makes Argentina's craft brewing scene different from other countries, Ferrari notes that in his extensive travels abroad he encounters a lot of interest in automation, a fascination that does not exist at home.

"I've gotten to visit lots of breweries in the United States and Europe, and I'm always shocked by everyone's obsession with involving less and less people in the brewing process and standardizing everything," Ferrari says. "In Argentina it's not like that. You see people connecting and disconnecting hoses, carrying sacks of malt, mixing things, and I see it as more… I guess you could say it is more primitive, but it is also more human."

He goes on to state that another difference is that Argentinian brewers have a stronger emphasis on collective brewing than other countries. "In Argentina, from a young age we're taught to always be sharing everything," says Ferrari. "We grow up very attached to social groups and that does carry over to the way we brew beer. Brewing is not an individualistic activity here because we're not an individualistic country. Brewing with friends, and in our case with family, is part of a bigger cultural rite. We're like a *futbol* team. We are all working toward the same goal and different players have different strengths to get us there. That kind of *futbol* mentality, as you could imagine, really hits home for lots of Argentinians."

NEVER TOO MANY COOKS

"We don't have that 'too many cooks in the kitchen' saying in Argentina," says Daniel Rodriguez, a homebrewer from the city of Córdoba. "Here, the more the better. The social component of homebrewing is the most important part of the whole thing for most of us. When I brew, I invite my friends and everybody has their hands in my product. We like lots of cooks."

Rodriguez says that perhaps the most important function of Somos Cerveceros, of which he is a proud member, is organizing frequent group brew sessions. He adds that the beer expos and contests are also, at their cores, networking opportunities to meet more friends to invite to one's homebrewery. "Without friends, what would be the point of homebrewing at all?" Rodriguez muses.

Esteban Soja, a professional chef and homebrewer in La Plata, agrees. "Brewing is basically a party," says Soja. "I brew every 15 days with friends. I come from a family of bakers, and beer is basically liquid bread to me, so I approach brewing and baking the same way. You've got yeast, grains, water, and temperature control. But the most important ingredient is always love."

BEERS WITHOUT FRONTIERS

The monstrous consolidation of beer by transnational conglomerates has altered Argentinians' relationship with brands that until recently had always had a stranglehold on the market. "Years ago when the headlines read that Brahma had bought Quilmes, it was a huge shock to our national pride," recalls Ferrari. "Quilmes had always been a solidly Argentinian brand, representative of Argentinian values, but the moment that Argentina's flagship beer, decked out in our flag's colors, was sold to a Brazilian beer label, that was when the charm was gone. It might have hurt more because it was a traditional rival country, but then you realize it wasn't even really Brazil. These multinational companies don't have a homeland. They have no citizenship."

Big Beer's global reach and penchant for dominating in new and emerging

markets throughout the world is a well-documented strategy. Now Argentinian micro-, nano-, and homebrewers are borrowing a page from the beer-producing behemoths. They are organizing across borders to raise their collective international profile. "Craft beer is betting on diversity, community, buying local and all the things that are getting more valued in Argentina and elsewhere," says Ferrari. "It's a global ideology that's taken hold and I do not think this revolution shows any signs of going away."

"I agree with my friend Guido Ferrari," says Gisela Manufó, a homebrewer in the Argentinian city of Rosario. "For me being a brewer is about being a part of an international community. I'm a member of the American Homebrewers Association, Somos Cerveceros and several others. Some of my best girlfriends are brewers from Brazil, Mexico, and many other countries."

Manufó believes that for all the talk she hears about brewing being a "masculine" hobby, women in particular have a lot to gain from immersing themselves in the craft beer culture. "I know it's maybe not really common for women to brew beer in Latin American countries," says Manufó. "But being one of the few also means being special. I have never felt discriminated against or belittled in any way as a female brewer. On the contrary, brewing has been empowering and my fellow homebrewers, both men and women, treat me like a sister."

She adds that brewing and an appreciation for craft beer can bridge cultural gaps between societies. "There is something amazing and universal about homebrewing," Manufó says. "As a homebrewer, you take on this role and whether you are Argentinian, American, Mexican, Chinese, man, woman, old, young, or whatever, you know you are doing something that people all over the world have been doing for a long time. You are doing something beautiful, something without frontiers."

RESOURCES

1. http://www.pagina12.com.ar/51243-a-bullrich-le-subio-la-espuma
2. http://bodegadecervezas.wordpress.com/2015/05/05/argentina-las-cerveceras-industriales-van-por-todo-los-grupos-concentrados-intentan-acaparar-tambien-el-mercado-artesanal/

Efraín Villa is a photographer, actor, writer, and global wanderer whose endless quest for randomness has taken him to more than 50 countries in five continents. His writing has appeared on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, the Good Men Project, *TravelWorld International* magazine, *Zymurgy*, and Spanish-language publications. While not running his consulting firm in Albuquerque, he is busy devouring exotic foods in faraway countries and avoiding adulthood while wearing the least amount of clothes possible. More can be found on his website, AimlessVagabond.com.