A full-page background image of a winter landscape in Alaska. It shows a frozen lake with a small pool of water reflecting the sky and trees. The sky is a mix of blue, purple, and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. Evergreen trees line the shore, and some steam or mist is visible rising from the water.

IN A GREAT LAND

HOME BREWING
IN ALASKA

By Efraín Villa



The Chena River in Fairbanks, Alaska.

John Netardus is self-isolating.

He has not been outdoors in several days, at least not in the way Alaskans in his community near the Chena River are used to being outdoors. Sure, he goes outside to get his mail, but for the most part, John is hunkering down in his home and avoiding some of his favorite activities, which include hiking, fishing, camping, foraging, and hunting with friends and family. Essentially, he is sacrificing the pastimes that initially lured him out of Central Texas and into this challenging, yet strikingly beautiful, landscape.

John knows that staying home is the sensible thing to do at the moment, since venturing far without an essential need to do so could be hazardous, even reckless. →



O.G. SOCIAL DISTANCING

The first headlines mentioning COVID-19 are still weeks away, and terms like “contact tracing,” “personal protective equipment,” and “flattening the curve” are not yet common parts of the American lexicon. At this time, the biggest peril John faces, should he be foolhardy enough to step outside, is frostbite from baring skin to the air longer than a few minutes.

However, for him and many Alaskans, communing with nature is not just a recreational activity; it is a way of life. Resorting to looking at his surroundings through the barrier of a glass windowpane instead of directly experiencing the setting through touch, smell, and sound feels unsatisfying.

He spots a moose lazily sauntering past his mailbox near the towering snow drifts. “It’s just a cow,” he thinks, unamused, and gets back to monitoring the kettles steaming atop his kitchen stove. John picked up homebrewing as a hobby to help him weather the -40°F temperatures typical of Alaskan winters.

As he happily engages in social distancing from the comfort of his cozy kitchen, long before anyone knows what social distancing means, he glances at the empty bottles around him and does a quick mental calculation. Comforted by the fact that he is making far more beer than he is consuming today, he grabs another bottle and pops it open with his wedding ring, which is inscribed on the inner side with the date he got married, followed by the words: “John’s bottle opener.” The ring was made of 10-karat gold so it would withstand its practical function, because wearing an item exclusively for aesthetic purposes seemed wasteful somehow.

Finding ways to make items pull double duty is par for the course when living in an area where ice must be frequently scraped off the inside of one’s windshield with a credit card and temperatures drop so low



Fairbanks.



John’s “bottle opener.”

that koozies act as mini parkas to protect beer from freezing.

“Alaskans are generally handy and resourceful because we have to be,” says John. “Shipping things up here is very expensive and many of us just like making the things we need. It’s like a source of pride to use something someone else doesn’t want or to go into the garage and find a part you can make work for your purpose.”

Even the practice of making beer can be assigned a secondary function. John cools his wort, for example, by taking his hot brew kettle outside and melting the ice accumulating on his deck with it. In the process, the deck gets cleared of stubborn slip hazards and the wort rapidly chills.

The equipment John uses to brew was gathered by scavenging for different components at yard sales and responding to ads posted on Facebook. Although he lives within driving distance of Gavora’s Fine Wine & Growler Pub in Fairbanks, a local

establishment selling homebrewing equipment and supplies, John still prefers to make his own brewing tools when he can.

“At first I didn’t want to invest too much money on equipment because I didn’t know I was going to like brewing beer so much,” says John. “Until my friends and my dad started telling me how much they loved what I made. I’m missing a lot of stuff, still. Like I don’t have a real hot liquor tank or a sparge arm, but I’ve made my own. I use a gallon jug with holes drilled on the top and that’s how I drizzle hot water onto my grains. I have to wear a glove to not get burned, but it works well. I guess I can just buy a sparge arm, but it’s more interesting this way.”

BREWING IN INTERESTING TIMES

I met John while taking a break from aurore chasing in December. I had stepped into the Midnite Mine taproom in Fairbanks to get a taste of the newest craft beer joint in town, and also to find shelter from what I called a blizzard and locals referred to as “not real snow.”

John had approached the owner tending bar to ask him if he could get some brewing tips. “I learned to brew from a book, so there’s a lot I don’t know how to do the right way,” John confessed. “Fortunately, people around here usually try to help each other out.”



Ted Rosenzweig's homebrew setup.

I called John up in the spring to follow up on his homebrewing progress. A lot had changed since my winter visit to Alaska. A pandemic had swept through the planet, upending people's lives. In the northern hemisphere, winter had given way to spring, or as many Alaskans call it, "break up," because spring is when the ice sheets begin to break up. Still weeks away was the "green up," the unofficial term Alaskans give to the abrupt interlude that transforms barren tree clusters into majestic green forests and soggy fields into meadows of multicolored blooms.

The century-old spring tradition of participating in the Nenana Ice Classic, an event that predates the last major pandemic, was underway but with some notable changes. This wildly popular annual guessing game lets people try their hand at predicting the exact date and time the Tanana River will thaw enough to swallow up a big tripod attached to a clock. When the tripod falls, the clock stops, marking the time of the "break up." The winner is the one who gets closest to the time of the stopped clock. Last year's prize pot was more than \$300,000.

This year, ticket sale deadlines to enter the pool were extended due to the closure of so many point-of-sale outlets. Also, because people who normally record the ticket data were following stay-at-home orders, ticket processing was extended and participants were allowed to mail in their guesses from anywhere in Alaska.



Highbush cranberries.

"It's funny how some things are pretty much exactly as always and other things are pretty different," John told me, echoing the sentiment of most people living through the first pandemic in their generation. The sense of community he had mentioned at the Midnite Mine taproom was one of the elements that he found a bit changed.

Like most Alaskan brewers I spoke to by phone, John believed that Alaskans were likely better prepared to withstand pandemic quarantines and other global calamities than "people down in the lower 48" because Alaskans' everyday lives involve contingency routines. They are used to having several weeks' worth of food in freezers and thinking about what-if scenarios that feature inclement weather, earthquakes, volcanoes, avalanches, flooding, and wildfires.

However, the pandemic is a different kind of challenge, John admitted, because the ability to endure collective hardships in many ways has always hinged on community rather than isolation. "We are still very



John's beers.

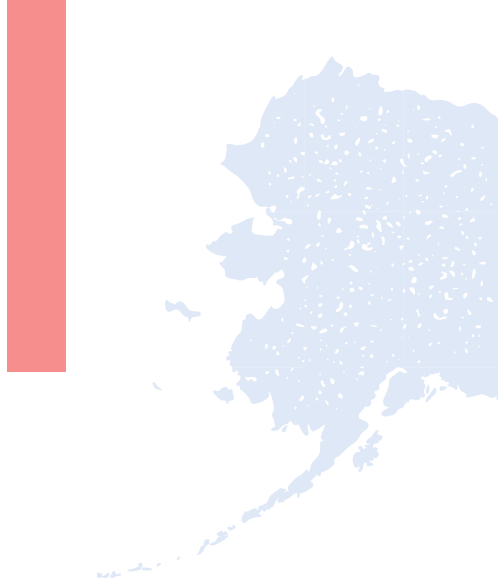


Local berries are popular homebrew additions.

social even in the harsh winter months," John told me. "Maybe especially in the winter months. So that part can be hard about the social distancing thing. When it drops down to the -30s and -40s [°F] for a few consecutive days here, it's just wiser to stay indoors if you can, but even then, we still have family and neighbors come over. I originally took up homebrewing because it let me make something I love while cooped up at home, but sharing the beer with friends and family is what kept me brewing after that first batch. For now, that sharing part is different. It's not really there."

The Great Northern Brewers Club in Anchorage was also finding it challenging to nurture the communal aspect of brewing in a time when socializing in confined spaces had become taboo. The day after the club had conducted its first Zoom teleconference meeting, I spoke to Christophe Venot, a longtime club member.

"That Zoom meeting was awkward," said Christophe. "It was not the best attendance and it was...we can't expect things to be the same. We have work to do to keep engagement up during this time because there's no end in sight to social distancing. But I want to think that some things will remain



the same; like the gravity of our beers will always be inversely proportional to the length of our daylight.”

KEEPING IT LOCAL WITH AN ALASKAN TWIST

As the weather warmed up, many Alaskan brewers took the stay-at-home orders in stride and seized the opportunity to brew more than they might have otherwise.

“It is true that when you’re Alaskan, you endure difficulties that make you develop a kinship. We even have our own vocabulary around it, like *cheechako* (newcomer) and sourdough (a hardened local), but we are also fiercely independent,” says Dr. Ted Rosenzweig, a surgeon, homebrewer, and owner of Turnagain Brewing in Anchorage. “I think that independence is the character trait that might help Alaskans during the quarantine, and it’s also what drives us to find ways to make beer our own, adding an Alaskan twist to the classics.”

Dr. Rosenzweig has brewed beer in various parts of the United States, including Arizona and Colorado. He says he always tries to incorporate local ingredients, and in Alaska that has meant creating homebrews with local highbush cranberries, crowberries, and yeasts cultured from alder wood. Other experimental Alaskan brewing ingredients include fireweed, rhubarb, chaga mushrooms, and birch sap. However, the rock star of the state’s brewing scene is black spruce tips.

Spruce tips grow in abundance throughout the state, which explains why they have a special place in Alaskan folklore. Their medicinal value, when they are harvested, how they are cut, and even the time of day when they are snipped are topics of great philosophical debate. In brewing, the tiny branches can add a pleasant fruity, citrusy flavor profile to beers when hops are not readily available.



John and his beer.

Although hop vines grow exceptionally well in Alaska’s 24-hour summer sunlight, in order to produce the conical buds, the plant needs intermittent exposure to darkness, a hard-to-come-by element in the land of the midnight sun. When darkness does come, it brings cold temperatures in which hops cannot thrive. So, without being able to easily produce their own hops, Alaskans do what they do best: find a workaround with what they have at hand.

“Brewers here love using spruce tips, and we even get online orders for them from the lower 48, as well,” says Lisa Peltola, owner of Arctic Brewing Supply. The Anchorage business is the largest brewing equipment and supplies dealer in the state. “Our spruce tips are of the Sitka variety, which are harvested and shipped to us from a little island off of Juneau and basically treated like fresh fish in terms of packaging and shipping.”

Although Lisa has seen brewing trends ebb and flow in the almost two decades that she and her husband have owned the store, she thinks there is still plenty of room for growth. “We have so many people off the grid and so many of us do a lot of hunting, canning, fishing, smoking, and preserving of foods, basically subsistence living, that I sometimes wonder why brewing is not even more popular here,” she says.

THE ESSENTIALS OF HOMEBREWING

In many states’ drafts of pandemic stay-at-home orders, food and beverage manufacturers (and in some cases their suppliers) were designated as “essential businesses,” which exempted Arctic Brewing Supply



from having to close. The store remained open with limited hours and instated strict social distancing guidelines that limited the number of customers allowed in the store at once to just three.

“We are a big part of the local homebrewing community here, and we are happy to do our part to keep our customers safe and still let them have a bit of their normal life when they go home and brew,” says Lisa. “And actually, we saw a significant increase in customer traffic when the shutdown went into effect.”

While many people were stocking up on toilet paper and yeast for baking bread, homebrewers were trying to ensure they would have enough yeast and other provisions to brew through the shutdown. “When I found out stores were going to close, I went and bought a bunch of grain, hops, and yeast so I could be brewing every weekend,” says James Strzempka, a fire department dispatcher in Anchorage who brews with a small club called Suds of Anarchy. “Actually, I would be hunkered down and brewing even without a shut-



James Strzempka's brew den.

down because break up is a very muddy time in Alaska to be outside, and winter makes my garage door freeze shut if I create too much steam in there."

Josh Largent, a contracting specialist in the Air Force, agrees that springtime is the best time for brewing in Alaska, although for different reasons. "I brew outside in the winter even when it's forty below zero, but my boil (off) rate is very extreme and it's hard to even see the boil because of the wall of steam," says Josh. "I also have to keep shaking my propane tank to keep it flowing when it's that cold, and because the mash tun gets so cold, you have to over-shoot your mash temperature when you add your grains to make up for the equipment temperature."

Josh would brew in the summer were it not for a legendary Alaskan foe. "Mosquitos where I live are no joke in the summer, and I am from Florida, so I know mosquitos," he says emphatically. "I've never seen anything like it. They can take down a caribou! So, the spring is good, it's warmer, and you only have to watch out for moose."

Josh thinks the pandemic has made him get more creative about the ways in which he can expand his network. When the shutdowns were announced, he went to a nearby distillery and got 30 pounds of homegrown, 2-row grains in exchange for some of the freshly brewed beer he planned to make with it.

John, too, found partnerships in unlikely places. In addition to befriending local brewers such as Talon Hobbs at Midnite Mine, he has discovered that Gavora's will let him use a grain mill they have attached to a drill if he buys something. Actually, he says they have never put any conditions on his use of the mill, but he always buys something to show his gratitude.

Seven batches after the very first batch that got him hooked on brewing, John wonders about his track record, which includes two bad batches, one of which he still hopes to repurpose somehow. "I'm usually a firm believer of 'save the drink,' but since I don't think sour brown ales are a thing, because they're really gross, I'll figure out something else to do with it," he says.

Brew This!



Spruced Up AK Pale

Spruce tip pale ale

Lisa Peltola has been a member of the Great Northern Brewers Club since 1992 and is a lifetime member. She is co-owner of Arctic Brewing Supply in Anchorage, Alaska. The spruce tips in this recipe come from Gustavus, Alaska, and are picked by Harvey "the twig master."



Recipe courtesy Lisa Peltola.

Batch volume: 6 US gal. (22.7 L)
Original gravity: 1.058 (14.3°P)
Final gravity: 1.012 (3.1°P)
Color: 7.5 SRM
Bitterness: 31 IBU
Alcohol: 6.1% by volume

MALTS & ADJUNCTS

11 lb. (4.99 kg) Crisp Maris Otter
 12 oz. (340 g) British crystal malt, 45 L
 8 oz. (227 g) Carapils malt
 4 oz. (113 g) flaked oats

HOPS

1.25 oz. (35 g) Cascade hops,
 8.2% a.a. @ 60 min
 0.5 oz. (14 g) German Hüll Melon pellets,
 5.6% a.a. @ 0 min

BREWING NOTES

Mash 90 minutes at 152°F (67°C). Lauter, sparge, and collect wort. Boil 60 minutes, adding hops, spruce tips, and Whirlfloc at the indicated times. Chill to 68°F (20°C) and pitch yeast.

Ferment at 68°F (20°C) for 7 days. Rack to secondary and condition for 7 days before bottling or kegging.

EXTRACT VERSION

To make a 6-gallon batch using malt extract, replace the Maris Otter malt with 6 lb. (2.72 kg) light dried malt extract and omit the flaked oats. Steep the crystal and Carapils malts for 30 minutes at 155°F (68°C) in reverse osmosis water. Remove grains and completely dissolve the malt extract in the resulting wort. Top up with reverse osmosis water to desired boil volume and proceed as above.

ENGLISH ALE OPTION

Ferment using White Labs WLP007 Dry English Ale Yeast instead of the American Ale Yeast to achieve a target final gravity of 1.010 (2.6°P) and an alcohol concentration of 6.4% ABV.

WATER

Anchorage tap water filtered through a charcoal filter

YEAST

Wyeast 1056 American Ale Yeast
 (starter recommended)

ADDITIONAL ITEMS

5.5 oz. (156 g) Sitka spruce tips @ 60 min
 1.25 oz. (35 g) Sitka spruce tips @ 40 min
 1 tablet Whirlfloc @ 40 min
 1 oz. (28 g) Sitka spruce tips @ 0 min
 10 g Clarity Ferm, added to primary

While the airlocks of John's homebrewing kit gurgle away, he sits back and relaxes at home. "The blooping sound is therapeutic," he muses. "It's random, interesting, and calming to listen to; it's sort of like watching a campfire. Cavemen must have enjoyed staring at campfires for entertainment thousands of years ago, right?"

Definitely.

Regardless of how much our world changes, the important things remain the same.

Efraín Villa is a photographer, actor, writer, communications strategist and

global wanderer. His endless quest for randomness has taken him to more than 50 countries on five continents. Villa's English- and Spanish-language work appears in diverse publications, including AARP The Magazine, TravelWorld International, and NPR's Weekend Edition. While not running his communications consulting firm in Albuquerque, he is busy devouring exotic foods in faraway countries and avoiding adulthood while wearing the least amount of clothing possible. More can be found on his website, AimlessVagabond.com.