



What Beer Can Teach Us

By Efraín Villa

Ferment on this: Fermentation science and brewing studies programs are increasingly common at American universities, but most students do not reach legal drinking age until after their third year of undergraduate education. Many states make exceptions for students enrolled in such courses of study—so-called “sip and spit” laws let supervised underage students taste fermented beverages in class—but college campuses still have a complex relationship with alcohol. Some professors, however, are using beer’s rich history to motivate investigations into other subjects for students of all ages.



University of New Mexico (UNM) students visit Red Hat Hops farm near Albuquerque as part of UNM's Geography of Beer course.

"Hear the voice of righteousness and repent now before descending into the bowels of damnation whereon Satan will spring forth from the flames and claim your soul for all eternity," a twenty-something-year-old man in the middle of a campus courtyard yells into a defective mic.

The only words intermittently amplified are "hear the ... bowels ... spring forth," but the young, smiling students nearby do not seem to notice the scatological heeding as they nonchalantly walk past his flailing arms. They squint against the sun to spot friends within the crowded field of pop-up canopies draped in "Welcome Back to UNM" banners. A tanned woman near them gets up, puts her iPad in her backpack, and walks over to a Get Out the Vote volunteer standing next to a rainbow-colored booth. Even with the looming threat of eternal damnation, the whole scene is imbued in youthful optimism.

Few occasions are as exciting in college as the start of a new school term, and today it is not just the promise of connecting with friends that has college students excited. At this university, registrants have the opportunity to further their education through a rigorously academic study of beer and its global role in shaping culture, economics, politics, and natural environments. That is the idea behind Geography of Beer courses offered at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in Albuquerque and Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth.

BEER AS A LENS

These classes embrace the intersection of beer and education in creative ways to attract students to the study of more esoteric subjects. "This class is not about beer tasting or beer appreciation, and it is not a how-to chemistry class," says Maria Lane, associate professor and chair of the Geography and Environmental Studies Department at UNM.

Standing at the front of an auditorium decorated with maps and rock specimens, Lane uses her hand to shield her eyes from the black-and-white projected syllabus. After pausing to let straggling students find seats in the unfamiliar space, she clears her throat and continues, "This class is about leveraging the huge interest in beer right now to learn about present and past spatial relationships in our world." As she speaks, she scans the room for signs of approval or understanding. The only discernible sound from her students is the soft whoosh of a pen expertly spinning around the thumb of a Lobo hoodie-clad man.

Sensing a disconnect with her audience, Lane adjusts her tactic. "I know this seems very academic," she sighs. "Let me put it another way: the word *beer* in the course title probably drew your attention to the less popular subject of geography. Beer is very relatable today, especially in cities like Albuquerque, where we've really embraced the craft beer culture, but in the end, beer is just a concept we can use to learn geography and get the added benefit of using our town as an urban classroom."

She finishes going over the syllabus and grading scale. The class remains completely silent. "So, the bottom line is that it would be pretty sad if you went home to your parents with anything less than an A+ in a beer course," she says, finally eliciting a relaxed, collective giggle.

"Alright, how many of you are geography majors?" she asks.

One student out of more than a hundred in the auditorium raises her hand.

"Good!" Lane says. "My goal is to convert the rest of you."

Anyone who has ever transformed a spoonful of veggie puree into a choo-choo train for the benefit of a picky toddler knows that making things palatable for discerning audiences is one of the toughest duties that comes with being in a position of authority.

"Getting students interested in geography as a field of study is not easy, so I am pretty shameless about my beer bait-and-switch approach," jokes Sean Crotty, assistant professor of geography at TCU.



Top: Red Hat Farms founder Tom Brewer guides UNM students on a tour of his New Mexico hop farm. Bottom: Antonio Fernandez, head brewer at Ponderosa Brewing Co., discusses craft beer with UNM students.



“Isn’t it just plain cooler to learn about this stuff through beer?”

“Like Maria [Lane], I also tell my students on the first day of class that this is not a brewing or tasting class. I tell them that it is a challenging geography class, which means that some students run for the door, but even if the remaining ones, even if they never again take a geography course, hopefully learn a bit about the connectedness of our planet.”

Students who stay in these classes tend to be very forgiving of the good-natured trickery. “I get that beer is part of a marketing strategy for getting people to take these kinds of classes, and so what?” says Mark Steen, a 70-year-old retired editor enrolled in Lane’s class at UNM. “Even for the other students in my class who are a fraction of my age, it’s obvious from the beginning that beer is just a lens to explore geography. I suppose that instead of beer it could be something like coal. Coal can also help explain migration patterns, the allocation of natural resources,

the evolution of technology in human settlements, and lots of other geographical stuff in the same way that beer can, but isn’t it just plain cooler to learn about this stuff through beer? And would anyone ever be really excited to take a class called The Geography of Coal?”

TO BEER OR NOT TO BEER?

Whether beer or any alcoholic beverage should be mentioned in an academic setting is a question universities struggle with at a time when harmful drinking continues to be a problem on campuses throughout the U.S. According to the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (an annual survey from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), nearly 54 percent of full-time college students aged 18 to 22 reported having consumed alcohol in the month prior to the study. More than a third of that population engaged in binge drinking during the same timeframe.

Against this grim backdrop, faculty at American universities tend to be very apprehensive about welcoming beer into the classroom. “We have to be very conscientious about the needs of our students, their parents, and our community,” says Lane. “This class does not promote drinking alcohol and a significant portion of the class says they do not even like beer, and that’s true whether I ask that question at the beginning or at the end of the semester.”

Richard Wood, interim provost at UNM, adds that it just makes sense for institutions of higher learning to meet student needs by engaging their interests and passions. “Our sweet spot is education that overlaps with students’ excitement. One thing college students are excited about is craft beer. UNM hosts a responsibly run taproom and a (geography) course called World of Beer. The idea originally came from our students, and the university responded enthusiastically and responsibly.”



Crotty says he was fortunate that others had already paved the way for him to use beer as a teaching tool at TCU. “Maybe it would have been harder to launch this kind of class at another college because of the stigma associated with alcohol, but colleagues of mine here at TCU had already done the heavy lifting; one of them teaches a class on the science and history of whiskey,” says Crotty. “Plus, I already had some exposure to a Geography of Surfing college-level class, so making the pitch to teach Geography of Beer wasn’t too intimidating, and I don’t think the university found it particularly edgy as an idea. It’s sort of what all of us do in conversation every day; we find ways to connect subjects that might sound disparate so we can make better sense of the world.”

Courtney Favaloro, a recent TCU graduate who took the Geography of Beer class as a senior last year, admits that tapping into students’ personal interests within a curriculum has its challenges. “You have to get past the title of the class, which I guess can be interesting for students but scary for some people, especially parents,” says Favaloro. “I think some students’ parents can be a bit apprehensive since they’re usually the ones paying for their kids’ classes, and if they just look at the title it can look like they’re paying for their kids to get drunk, but that’s a totally inaccurate way of looking at things. I don’t know why the mention of beer would be any different than when grapes and wines are discussed when learning about climates. My parents were actually really interested in this class and they weren’t scared by the title.”

Roy Villa, a former Marine who took the TCU class in the first half of 2018 agrees that talking about beer in a classroom does not cause students to drink more, but he believes it does affect drinking behavior. “Honestly, I don’t think the class would make anyone drink who doesn’t already drink,” says Villa. “But, when you’re a

freshman straight out of high school, you are probably drinking the cheapest beer available, and when you learn how important beer has been in the world, you sort of don’t want to drink cheap, bad quality beer anymore. For me, it didn’t make me drink more, but I would say the class made me drink better. ... I would rather spend money on one or two quality craft beers instead of buying a bunch of mainstream beers.”

A RIO RUNS THROUGH IT

A month into the semester, about two dozen of Lane’s students arrive at Red Hat Hops, a farm in the middle of the Rio Grande Valley a few miles from downtown Albuquerque. Her class incorporates guest speakers and field trips that she arranges with of-age and underage students in mind. These trips include local events as well as walking tours.

As the group makes its way through the baby hop vines tethered to what look like giant clothes hangers, Chinenye Ezenwanyi Ndiulor tells me the course has been much more interesting than she expected.

“I’m not really into beer, and I was looking for an easy class,” admits Ndiulor. “It hasn’t really been easy, and I still don’t really like beer, but I have learned a lot and I have been able to start conversations with customers when I’m working as a server. Like the other day, I was explaining the differences between lagers and ales and how IPAs were invented to get around (the horn of) Africa.”

While Tom Brewer, the farm’s founder and owner, leads the class on a tour and discussion about hops cultivation, a few of the students use their phones to snap pictures of the plants. He explains the latitudinal limits in which hops grow and mentions that hops and cannabis plants are closely related.

“We’re only interested in the female plants here,” Brewer says. “Can anyone guess why?”

“Because it’s all about the bud,” a student blurts out, prompting the rest to chuckle.

“Exactly,” says Brewer. “And maybe someday the demand for the buds will be much greater for medicinal purposes, like treating insomnia, than as a beer ingredient.”

Eric Bodwell, a liberal arts major, says these field trips are his favorite part of the class. “I love learning the human geography of beer and that it basically came as a byproduct of trading a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for cities, and even now we can see that in craft breweries’ architectures,” says Bodwell. “It’s why it’s so common to see breweries in industrial spaces with exposed beams and all that; it’s because they’re trying to make sure that the place says ‘Look at us—we make stuff here.’”

When asked what the most important lesson from the class has been, Bodwell pauses and says that he especially enjoyed exploring associations between new neighborhood breweries and gentrification. “There’s a quote one of the speakers used that I repeat all the time now,” says Bodwell. “Microbreweries are like catnip for hipsters.”

Steen, for his part, says his favorite part of the class is getting the opportunity to exchange ideas with people outside his age group.

“This is the thirteenth class I’ve taken since turning 65, and I have always thought at some point the younger people would be rolling their eyes at the old guy asking questions,” says Steen. “But I have never gotten pushback from professors or students. The kids are so respectful and polite and fall in line with me when walking to another class and we’ll have wonderful conversations. How often does someone my age get to mingle with young people? If putting beer in the title of a geography course can bring us all together to learn from each other, isn’t that just another great role for beer to play in its long history?”

Efrain 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, in TravelWorld International magazine, in Zymurgy, on CraftBeer.com, and in 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. His travel stories dealing with the messiness, humor and beauty of cultural collisions can be found on his website, Aimless Vagabond.