



FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN BEERS AGO

CROWDFUNDING A COMMUNITY BREWERY

BY EFRAÍN VILLA

“**W**E THE PEOPLE OF THE ALE REPUBLIC are a community of beer enthusiasts who here-forth seek to found a new beer establishment that strives to bring quality New Mexican beers from all corners of our great state, to establish a community-oriented atmosphere and to build an educational environment in which our members can learn about beer and brew their own recipes.”



With only five days left in the online fundraising period, the month-long Kickstarter drive to launch the community-centric brewhouse was nearing what appeared to be a disastrous end. Support had floundered, leaving the Ale Republic with pledged funds that totaled just half of the \$25,000 goal.

"The entire time we were raising seed money through the Kickstarter campaign, we kept asking ourselves if we were crazy," recalls Zach Gould, cofounder of the Ale Republic, which he describes as a cross between a brewery, a community center, and an innovation incubator.

Kickstarter, the popular online crowdfunding platform, allows users to pitch projects to a virtual marketplace of potential donors, but each campaign is built on an "all or nothing" proposition. If the Ale Republic failed to reach its stated funding objective, it meant that the \$12,500 already pledged as contributions would be lost, along with the months of work it took to research, plan, and implement the campaign strategy.

A REVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT

The original idea that led to the Kickstarter campaign had germinated three years earlier when Patrick Johnson, the other cofounder of the Ale Republic, was completing a yearlong study abroad program

in France. While overseas, Johnson had joined a beer club that introduced him to an inclusive community of brewers who nurtured his passion for homebrewing. Upon returning to his hometown of Albuquerque, N.M., he decided to import what he learned from the beer club model.

"It started as a small group of beer enthusiasts getting together to share brewing ideas, experiment, and enjoy drinking good beer," says Johnson. "Before long we were having a monthly get-together that we called First Thursday Beer Underground, which is as literal as it gets: we had it on the first Thursday of every month in my basement."

Over the next three years, the monthly gatherings drew more and more brewers eager to share their latest creations. The experimental beers and welcoming vibe, accompanied by local musical acts, also began attracting larger numbers of thirsty tasters, many of them students at the nearby University of New Mexico, the largest university in the state.

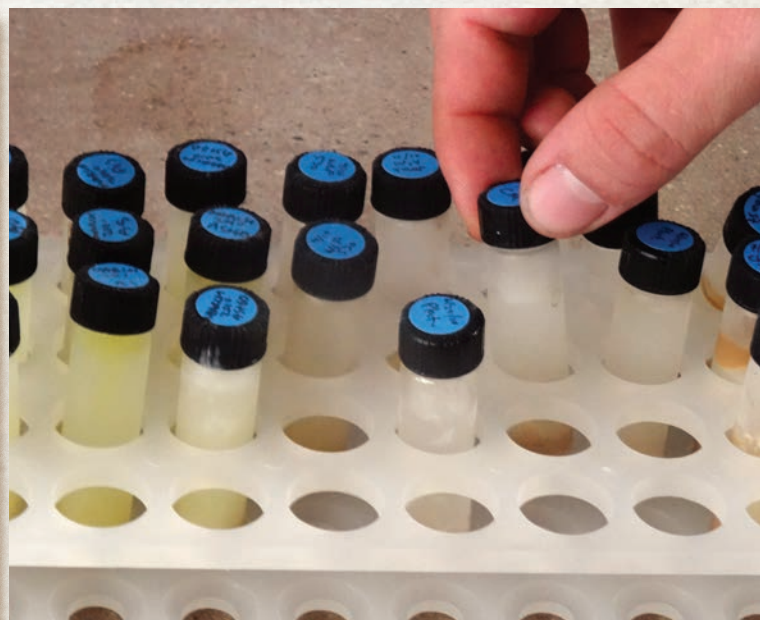
Eventually, the crowds filled not just the basement, but the ground floor and backyard of the house. "It started getting too big," says Johnson. "We never wanted it to be just a big house party. The focus was always supposed to be on brewing beer and creating a community of beer enthusiasts."

Johnson and Gould began floating the idea of turning their beer club into a formal business. "We already had this community in the Beer Underground," says Gould. "So we started asking them what they thought about our business idea and they were really supportive. That's how the Ale Republic Kickstarter was born."

But getting by with a little help from friends is not easy. "Now we say that our biggest capital is that we know a lot of people because we grew up here," Gould continues. "But at first it felt weird asking our friends to contribute. I think because of how our culture is set up, we're ashamed to ask for help. Then when you do ask, you realize that there are tons of people who want to lend a hand whenever they can."

Gould and Johnson assembled a team of volunteers with diverse professional backgrounds to begin developing the business plan. A local graphic artist created the logo, friends in New Mexico's thriving movie industry set up a film crew to shoot the video for the Kickstarter, and financial analysts contributed their expertise in drafting an initial budget.

They estimated they would need approximately \$100,000 to get the Ale Republic up and running. "We always had the idea we'd have to take out a



loan,” says Johnson. “We wanted to ask for enough money through the Kickstarter to get the ball rolling, but not so much that it was unrealistic.”

SUPPORT FOR THE CAUSE

Gould and Johnson followed the best practices of crowdfunding. They contacted the press, promoted their cause through social media, and created incentive packages for donors that included swag, beer tastings, and even a custom engraving on the brewhouse’s patio with the donor’s choice of text.

Then the contributions began trickling in...slowly. Very slowly.

“In New Mexico, Land of *Mañana*, people were thinking: ‘We’ll donate later,’” says Johnson.

In the last week before the conclusion of the Kickstarter campaign, when the numbers clearly showed a projected failure to get funded, Gould and Johnson took to social media with videos and posts appealing to friends’ generosity. One of their pleas read, “Don’t put it off. Don’t wait. Don’t say you’ll come to the bar and buy a beer. Right now, right here, we need your love, sugar, and attention!”

It worked. They watched on their phones as the Kickstarter’s funding progress graph began to register a spike

in contributions. As people responded to their desperation and urgency, the graph continued on a new trajectory that put the goal within reach. “I feel like I’m watching the Kentucky Derby!” wrote Johnson in response to a Facebook message of support.

But then with two days to go, the contributions once again stalled.

“Check out this awesome progress chart!” wrote Johnson on a Facebook post containing a graph. “See that flat line at the end? Let’s stop that flat-line trend or we are dead!”

Then it happened. The day before the funding deadline, they reached their \$25,000 goal, and since the funds kept coming in, they started promoting a “stretch goal” of \$30,000. In the end, the Kickstarter campaign succeeded, receiving a total of \$28,885 from 305 backers from the US, and even six from abroad.

The dramatic unfolding of the Ale Republic’s Kickstarter is typical of the bandwagon effect that drives most crowdfunding projects. The daily updated statistics on Kickstarter’s website show that even in a virtual marketplace, the axiom that it takes money to make money holds true. Approximately 65% of all launched Kickstarter projects fail, but failure rates dramatically diminish the closer projects

get to their goal. Projects that reach more than 80 percent of their goal make up less than 1 percent of the total number of failed projects. By contrast, projects that do not reach 20 percent of their goal make up 84 percent of all failed campaigns.

NATION BUILDING

I caught up to Johnson and Gould a year and a half after their successful Kickstarter campaign.

They were busy digging trenches behind a building located in Cedar Crest, a small community nestled in the mountains that flank Albuquerque’s east side. A handwritten sign near the dirt road leading to the parking lot read “Brewery Coming.” The property had already been outfitted with brewing equipment, a yeast laboratory, and refrigeration room, but the dangling wires, scattered two-by-fours, and littered pieces of sheetrock were reminders that this was still very much a work in progress.

“The permitting and zoning bureaucracy has really sucked,” said Gould, as he worked his shovel around a pipe. “We’re the first brewery in Bernalillo County that is outside of the city (Albuquerque), so we’ve had to endure their learning curve. I think the county thought we were going to be pouring gallons and gallons of boiling water down the pipes. They didn’t

NEW MEXICO WILD MOUNTAIN ALE

AMERICAN WILD SPECIALTY BEER (BJCP 2015 28C)

CONTRIBUTED BY PATRICK JOHNSON

YEAST IS SOMETIMES UNDERAPPRECIATED for its flavor contributions, especially with the continuing trend toward hoppy and, more recently, sour beers. However, these styles use a fairly small set of available microbes, so we have paid a lot of attention to capturing and culturing our own yeast and bacteria. This recipe is based on a Belgian blonde ale but uses locally sourced hops and locally cultured yeast to deliver a beer that's truly—well—local! Adapt it to take advantage of whatever is local to you.

Batch Volume: 6 U.S. gallons (22.7 L)
Original Gravity: 1.072 (17.5° P)
Final Gravity: Depends on your particular blend of bugs
Color: 6 SRM
Bitterness: 14 IBU
Alcohol: 8% or more by volume

MALTS

13 lb. (5.9 kg) Pilsner malt
1 lb. (454 g) CaraPils
2 oz. (57 g) Special B
1.5 lb. (680 g) clear Belgian candi sugar or table sugar

HOPS

1 oz. (28 g) Tettnang @ 90 min
1 oz. (28 g) Neomexicanus (native to New Mexico) @ 15 min

YEAST

Pitch 50 to 200mL of active cells.

BREWING NOTES

Collect a wild blend of yeasts and bacteria from your local environment. Culture through many generations until you have the desired trait (we like a homogeneous flavor profile). Save your culture and propagate it up to a pitchable starter. If not culturing your own microbes, choose your favorite mixed-fermentation blend.

Mash at 150° F (66° C) for 30 minutes. Raise mash temperature to 162° F (72° C) for another 30 minutes and mash out at 172° F (78° C) for 10 minutes. Sparge and then boil for at least 90 minutes and up to 120–180 minutes. Pitch starter at 60–65° F (16–18° C) and ferment at 60–70° F (16–21° C) for 5 to 10 days. For a more flavorful beer and a longer maturation time, ferment at 60° F (16° C) for 5 days and then at 80° F (27° C) or higher for 5 days. When fermentation is finished, add any desired additional ingredients (dry hops, local fruit, fresh juniper berries, etc.). Rest under cellar conditions or in the refrigerator for two weeks before serving. Use bottle conditioning or force carbonate at medium to high carbonation.

EXTRACT VERSION

Substitute Pilsner malt with 9.75 lb. (4.42 kg) Pilsner malt extract. Steep dextrin and Special B malts at 155° F (68° C) for 30 minutes. Drain, rinse grains, and dissolve extract and sugar completely. Top off to desired boil volume with reverse osmosis or distilled water. Proceed with boil as above.

know anything about brewing processes on a septic system because city breweries are on a sewer system, so we had to educate them. Right now we're putting in a wastewater test so we can test the pH and check if there's any solids or proteins going into the septic system."

"We've had to learn a lot, too," admitted Johnson, wiping away sweat. "Before you even begin going through the permitting process, you have to have an address, which means you have to be paying rent. The permitting process takes more than a year, though, so you're paying rent on a property you can't even use."

They originally wanted to locate the brewhouse within Albuquerque, but with the recent boom of new breweries and taprooms in town, they were seen as just another newcomer jostling for space in an increasingly competitive market. "When we would talk to brewery owners about a center where everyone comes together to brew beer and we would ask them to partner with us to serve their experimental beers," explains Gould, "some would say, 'Great! As long as it's not within a certain radius of our place.'"

Johnson's father offered to let them use a vacant property he owned just outside of Albuquerque, and they accepted. "It's far away enough that we're not infringing on anyone," Johnson says, "and it gives us the opportunity to do something different from everybody else. It also allows us to be a destination brewery for the greater Albuquerque area and at the same time be a local's bar for this mountain community."

Although they have now turned their attention to the physical structures of the Ale Republic, the virtual components continue to be important. "We're doing homework online," says Johnson. "We talk to experts. Get on internet forums. It's a lot of trial and error, but we're not rushed, so we're able to be flexible to other things when something doesn't work the first time."

There is an Ale Republic mobile app in development that will allow patrons to see which beers are on tap. The platform will also allow users to critique and rate what

they sample. This feature is designed to complement the brewing benefits included in the top tier of membership, which include on-site brewing privileges. Members' experimental brews will be tasted, rated and critiqued by patrons and the brewer can then tweak the recipe based on feedback.

However, the prospect of brewing can be intimidating to newcomers. To help people get started, the Ale Republic and its supporters have started creating original instructional videos. "We want to educate people on how to brew and taste at all levels," says Gould. "So if they just want to enjoy good beer, that's great. And if they want to talk philosophical about beer with their pinkies up, they will be able to do that with the best of them."

The optimism of these two brewtrepreneurs is contagious as they talk about their plans for expansion, the home-grown strains of yeast they hope to one day sell, and yet-to-be-built beer gardens. Although it seems incredibly technical, Gould is quick to note that beer was for a long time made in people's kitchens.

"Brewing in general is a perfect marriage between cooking and baking," he says. "Half of it is very technical. You have to be precise and even a little anal retentive. The other half is winging it and just giving it a shot. If you can bake bread and make soup, that's it—you can brew beer."

It is easy to see how Gould and Johnson rallied 305 people around their cause. As founders, they brought forth on this nation a new brewery, conceived in a basement and dedicated to the proposition that all men and women are capable of brewing. Now they hope that others will also pledge allegiance to the craft and to the Ale Republic.

Efraín Villa is a photographer, actor, columnist, and global wanderer whose quest for randomness has led him to jobs in tourism marketing, police de-escalation training, and blogging for AimlessVagabond.com. When not running his consulting firm in Albuquerque, he is busy devouring exotic foods and avoiding adulthood.

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