



CRAFT BEER IN MEXICO

A STORY OF THE LITTLE FISH

By Efraín Villa





*“Poor Mexico,
so far from God, so
close to the United States.”*

President Porfirio Diaz’ famous quote touches on Mexico’s complex, and at times turbulent, relationship with its neighbor to the north, but industrious homebrewers in this vast country of 125 million inhabitants are not letting old colonial lamentations or geographic fatalism get in the way of complementing their homegrown ingenuity with borrowed American know-how.¹

The More Things Change...

Mexico’s love affair with crafting and ingesting an impressive array of fermented elixirs began long before the arrival of Europeans. Throughout Mesoamerica, it was common practice to produce and drink alcoholic concoctions made from corn, maguey, and agave for ceremonial and medicinal purposes. Although many of those beverages can still be found throughout modern-day Mexico, the cultural collisions of the last five centuries have drastically altered the drinking preferences of the New World’s inhabitants.

Presently, more than two-thirds of all Mexican consumers of alcohol prefer beer over any other alcoholic beverage, the highest rate on the entire American continent.² Academics attribute the changes in Mexico’s alcohol consumption habits to Darwinian economic policies, but many Mexican homebrewers take a more personal approach, viewing the status quo as a continuation of the power struggle over beer production rights that has embroiled class and caste since the Spanish conquistadors first introduced malt beer to the Americas.



One does not have to look hard to find historical examples of this conflict. As recently as the 19th century, European brewmasters jostled for control over the burgeoning malt beer markets in Mexico by leveraging taxation and non-disclosure agreements. These covenants were designed to safeguard against the general population accessing beer production resources and expertise.³ Strict laws regulating distribution networks of foreign goods further ensured that exotic brewing supplies, such as hops, remained exclusively in the hands of the country's elite.

The period that followed was not any less challenging for a young country trying to build a national identity. Shortly after securing its independence by winning wars against European empires, Mexico had to contend with a direct threat to its continued existence: American manifest destiny. Once the dust settled and the Mexican-American War had wound down, Mexico had ceded approximately one-third of its landmass to the United States. This ushered in the megafrenemy era of bilateral relationships that continues to dominate headlines today.

Presently, efforts to modernize Mexico's economy through international trade and industrialization are bearing fruit. Mexico is the 15th-largest market in the world and the third largest trade partner with the United States. Its middle class is the largest and fastest growing segment of its economy, according to recent studies by Euromonitor International.⁴ Overall, the country seems to be moving forward.

MEXICAN MICRO- AND NANO-BREWERS ARE WORKING HARD TO ORGANIZE, RISE UP, AND RECLAIM THEIR RIGHT TO BREW.

However, when it comes to beer production and consumption, it seems that the more things change in Mexico, the more they stay the same.

Is Mexican Beer Really Mexican?

Mexico is the world's largest beer exporter⁵ and sixth-largest beer consumer.⁶ Its nearly \$3 billion worth of beer exports get transported to 180 countries, and approximately 80 percent of those exports end up in the United States.⁷

However, whether all that beer should even be called Mexican depends on who you ask. Much like in previous centuries, Mexico's current beer production is once again dominated by foreign powers. The global consolidation of Big Beer through mega mergers in the last five years has left the country with a duopoly dominated by Grupo Modelo (owned by Anheuser-Busch InBev) and Cuauhtémoc Moctezuma (owned by Heineken). Together, these two foreign companies control 99 percent of domestic market share⁸, leaving very little left for imports and other domestic beers. Only about 0.1

percent of the beer market in Mexico is in the hands of independent microbreweries.

In short, Big Beer in Mexico is really big, but Mexican micro- and nano-brewers in basements, garages, and makeshift breweries scattered throughout the country are working hard to organize, rise up and reclaim their right to brew and have their creations tasted by an increasingly discerning public that until recently had no idea the words "beer" and "artisanal" could be used in the same sentence.

If large-scale beer production, seen through the prism of globalization, was a result of economic colonialism, then local homebrewers have responded with a rebellion; a movement in which guerilla entrepreneurs brandish their liquid creations as weapons to ensure Mexican beer is truly Mexican.

Big Fish Eats Little Fish, So Little Fish Befriends Sharks

Craft beer's popularity in Mexico has soared in the last decade. According to the newly formed ACERMEX, the Brewers Association of the Mexican Republic, there were 14 breweries prior to 2010. Today there are approximately 400. In terms of production and sales, craft beer has grown at a 50 percent annual rate for the last ten years.⁹

"I think the fact that Mexico's beer manufacturing was bought out by foreigners has made many Mexicans more cognizant consumers who try to support local beer," says Paz Austin, Director of ACERMEX. "Mexicans love embracing our Mexican

Photos courtesy of Efraim Villa



identity; you can see that nationalism in our indulgence of traditional dishes. Whether it's tacos, mole, or enchiladas, we take pride in creating things that are distinctly ours, and now we are doing with beer what we've always done with food."

ACERMEX is helping "Mexicanize" beer by lobbying to undo policies that favor large-scale breweries. Some of these policies include cost-of-goods-sold taxation, which disproportionately affects artisanal beers, and vertical integration concessions that allow mega breweries to control the supply side of production as well as distribution channels.

On a more conciliatory note, ACERMEX hopes to create a sense of community that goes beyond enterprise so as to help microbreweries grow on their own terms. As in other industrialized countries, the spike in demand for craft beer has prompted Big Beer to buy up as many reputable craft breweries as possible in order to expand their own brand portfolios. So even when consumers do buy craft beer in Mexico, the transaction does not necessarily translate to a score for the little guy.

This is why ACERMEX does not mince words when defining what craft beer is and is not. "First of all, a craft brewery cannot belong to one of the large brewing corporations that dominate the Mexican market," reads the ACERMEX website. "If they have already sold out to Big Beer, they are not craft beer . . . regardless of the image their brand or fame would like to project."

Big corporations swallowing up small businesses is, of course, nothing new, but the struggle of Mexico's microbreweries is much more than a story of big fish eats little fish. If we extend the oceanic metaphor further, craft beer production in Mexico is more akin to another deep-sea relationship: the bizarre, but common, pairing of the pilot fish and shark.

Pilot fish, despite their small size, have no problem swimming in shark-infested waters; in fact, they thrive in them. If you have ever seen a documentary on sharks, you probably saw a pilot fish happily swimming between a shark's razor-sharp teeth. That's because these little guys eat parasites on the shark's mouth and body. The shark gets to live a parasite-free existence, and the pilot fish gets access to food and protection from predators. The relationship is mutually beneficial; in this way pilot fish and homebrewers have one thing in common: the ability to recognize advantages in unlikely partnerships.

Go Where the Fish Are

Jordan Gardenhire is a Colorado native who a decade ago founded Baja Brewing Company in Cabo San Lucas, a resort town in the state of Baja California that boasts 13 percent of the entire country's breweries, second only to the greater Mexico City area.¹⁰ Recently he has struck up friendships with homebrewers.

"The only reason I know about people brewing at home around here is because

they come and buy hops and malt from me," says Gardenhire. "I give it to them at cost because it's such small amounts and I want to help the culture. Plus, they're our super fans, so they make great spokespeople for our industry."

One such super fan is Oscar Moreno, who homebrews in Todos Santos, located about an hour away from Cabo San Lucas. On the phone, I ask him how he became a homebrewer.

"I tried five years ago to brew for the first time and it was a complete disaster," he laughs. "Then a year ago a friend started talking about brewing beer and we tried again, and again it was a disaster. So we read books, the *Brewing Elements*, and invested in nicer equipment. After our first good batch of beer we were hooked." As a professional nursery grower of palm trees, Moreno has no problem peppering his speech with words like "micro-propagation," "hybridization," and "day-neutral hops." He tells me that Mexico's lack of daylight and seasonal variation (compared to northern and southern hop-growing latitudes) are what make it so hard to grow hops in the largely temperate country, which is why they have to be imported, but he emphasizes that recent hops varieties might be changing foreign dependence dynamics.

"I think new hybridized hops will be able to grow anywhere, and that's scary to Big Beer," Moreno says. "Those hops will be great for us little brewers because we'll finally have

access to the one ingredient we always have to import or scrounge for here.”

Typical of how in Mexico the transition from brewing hobbyist to entrepreneur is almost non-existent, Moreno is already thinking of selling his beers at the restaurant he and his wife run. It's not uncommon for Mexican homebrewers to set their sights on distribution, marketing, and revenue reinvestment plans soon after producing that first good batch of beer. In essence, a Mexican homebrewer is a microbrewer-in-waiting.

Sergio Silva founded Zona Norte Cervecería Artesanal in Tijuana with his two partners, brothers Jesus and Julio Galeana. Silva and the Galeana brothers met in college, bonded over friendly matches of *futbol*, and remain friends now that all three are in their thirties and married.

“We started brewing 20-liter batches when Jesus switched from winemaking to beer brewing,” Silva says. “Right away our friends and family on Facebook started asking us where they could buy our beers. So we switched gears from hobby to busi-

ness and named our little brewery after Tijuana's famous red-light district.”

Zona Norte's “brewery” is located in Jesus' garage. Silva tells me all three gather once every few weeks to brew beer. “It's become a ritual for us that begins at 5 a.m.” Silva says. “We also barbecue *carnitas* and [make] ceviche, and when the brewing is all over, we all do the real work: cleanup. Our wives join us, too. We wouldn't be able to do this if they weren't so supportive.”

They package their beer in recycled bottles gathered from local bars. After slapping on labels designed by Silva's wife, the beer is distributed to the homes of patrons who have placed orders via Facebook Messenger. “Each one of us takes a section of the city for deliveries,” says Silva.

“We try to embrace and honor Tijuana's folklore in everything with do,” Silva continues. “One of our beers, Adelas, carries the locals' colloquial name for Tijuana's most famous gentlemen's club and another beer is named Zacas, which is the nickname locals use for Zacazonapan, a famous dive bar in town.”

Silva pauses before beginning to describe the third beer he and his partners have an offer. “I saved the best for last,” Silva says, excitedly. “The third is a Mexican stout named Mahuana. La Mahuana (also spelled Maguana) is a famous vagrant in Tijuana who was a beautiful woman a long time ago; her real name is Maria Luisa Castro Valenzuela. According to ‘bad tongues’ she was betrayed by an American G.I. when they were supposed to run away together. Now she spends her days dancing, singing, and babbling incoherently in front of the cathedral, waiting for handouts. She's sort of become a Tijuana celebrity.”

True to form of any good legend, many versions of La Mahuana's tale exist. Her story has gained so much traction recently that Mexico's own native son, Oscar-winning director Alejandro González Iñárritu, is rumored to be working on a film about the border icon.

So what does La Mahuana have to do with craft beer? Silva tells me he and his partners wanted to make sure their beer was unashamedly *tijuanense*, but La Mahuana's border story can also be a proxy

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for Mexico's fascination with the underdog. Both La Mahuana and craft beer have been embraced as symbols of the little guy's survival and nonconformity; of Mexico's devotion to living life with abandon. A devotion that is best captured by the popular Mexican saying: "But what I've already danced, they can never take from me."

Uninhibitedness is all good, but Silva admits he prefers a shrewd business acumen in his own brewing gambit and reminds me that the tendency toward trade instead of hobby is not necessarily by choice. "Mexican culture is about survival and improving the hand you were dealt," says Silva. "I think in the United States maybe you're not as hungry as us because my American friends brew beer and never think to sell it. Here in Mexico, this is an expensive and labor-intensive hobby for us that competes with feeding and spending time with family. We see the potential of this industry, and it's exciting for us to think that this could be a way for us to be free from having to answer to a boss, and that's every Mexican's dream: to stop being slaves. So we throw ourselves in head first."

When I point out to Silva that he and his partners are well-educated engineers and that maybe his budding trade might not be easily accessible to all Mexicans, he quickly discards any notion that privilege plays a role in Mexico's craft beer scene. "I think if you want to do something, you work hard and do it without finding excuses," says Silva. "Yes, I have a fast internet connection to access instructional videos and I live on the border, so I am more likely to speak English than elsewhere in Mexico. But there are also apps that can help you translate. My grandfather never studied, he had a fruit-and-beer stand, and even without accounting degrees, he managed his little business and advanced in life. Brewing is something all Mexicans can do."

Although homebrewing might seem like an equal-opportunity activity to Silva, the demographics of homebrewers closely mirror the select Mexican craft beer market: affluent, urban, young and educated.¹¹

In Mexico, these demographics are related. As Silva pointed out, the internet is the

main resource for brewing instruction and materials, and a whopping 73.6 percent of Mexican internet users are under the age of 35, roughly the same percentage that live in cities.¹² Internet usage also correlates with education level, which is true both in the United States and Mexico, but when it comes to e-commerce, the difference between the two countries is striking.¹³ Whereas 79 percent of Americans have completed an online transaction, only 12.8 percent of Mexicans have engaged in e-commerce. Considering brick-and-mortar brewery supply stores are rare in Mexico, the potential for e-commerce to facilitate homebrewing in Mexico is substantial.

Recently, online stores selling brewing equipment and supplies have begun popping up in Mexico. Silva said that when the peso was stronger, crossing into San Diego to stock up on brewing materials was a far superior option than buying from a Mexican online middleman. "Now that the peso is so devalued, buying from Mexican online shops, even when you add the expense of shipping, can be better than paying in dollars," says Silva.

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supply chain of craft brewing, ACERMEX courts manufacturers of brewing equipment to locate to Mexico. The association makes it clear that they see craft brewing as a job creation strategy and that decreasing foreign dependence is feasible and healthy for the economy.

The Biologist and Masher

I approach an open doorway on a softly lit street in the colonial city of Puebla, in central Mexico.

“Are you looking for the biologist?” asks a man at the doorway.

“I’m looking for Jacinto Hernández Navarro,” I say.

“You mean the biologist who makes beer, right? It looks like that’s him coming this way,” the man gestures with his chin toward an ambling silhouette underneath fluffy trees shaped like Q-Tips lining the cobblestone sidewalk.

Hernández greets me with a handshake and a warm smile. “*Bienvenido a Puebla*,” he says. “Let’s step inside.”

We walk into Utopía, a bistro specializing in Belgian and domestic craft beer and sit at one of the small tables near the back. Hernández is the host of the weekly podcast *El Macerador* (Spanish for “The Masher”), which has the tagline “Beer literacy for everyone.” He has agreed to help me find homebrewers in Puebla to interview, although this ends up being a harder task than expected. The people we end up interviewing do brew in homes, in the technical sense, but they do so as a means to a commercial end.

“I don’t think there is much difference between nanobrewers and people like me,” says Hernández. “We have the same struggles, the only difference is that I am not actively pursuing the sale of my stuff.” He pauses for a moment, while a waiter puts beers at our table, and then he continues, “I suppose I should say I’m not yet pursuing the sale of my stuff, but hopefully someday.”

As the waiter gets ready to leave, Hernández politely lets him know that our beers were served in the wrong kind of glass. The embarrassed waiter quickly rectifies his mistake.

“I didn’t really know about the different glasses thing,” I admit.

“The thing is that in Mexico, drinking beer out of a glass instead of a bottle, any glass, is considered snobby,” he says. “So the way I see it, if we’re going to be snobs, we should go all in and at least get our beers served in the proper type of glass, right?”

I tell Hernández that it is a bit ironic that craft beer can be both an element of snobbery and counterculture.

“It all depends on context,” he says. “Belgian beer is not counterculture in Belgium, it’s just beer. Here, a Belgian beer is a big ‘up yours’ to Mexican Big Beer, which has basically dictated what we drink.”

The Mother of Invention

As craft beer has gotten more popular, brewers’ public profiles have risen. It is not uncommon for Mexican newspapers to feature pictures of smiling craft brewers posing in front of shiny tanks, talking about how they modified dairy tools into beer making equipment or



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describing a contraption made out of repurposed machinery.

"I used to use plastic hoses and aluminum pots when I first started," the nanobrewer, Erick Portillo, tells me, as we chat atop a Puebla terrace overlooking a colorful, bustling plaza. "It was hard to find ingredients, so I would use bleach and peroxide to sanitize, which is basically a sin."

Portillo says now that he sells his Cervecería Portillo beers to local restaurants and bars, he has a much better system. "It's a glorified home kit, better than most homebrewers have, but I still can't control temperatures," he acknowledges. "Consistency is the hardest part of this whole thing. Some of my friends think this is about getting drunk, but it's only because they don't realize that there has to be a whole lot of sobriety and mindfulness to create a delicious drink that can take the sobriety and mindfulness away."

Whatever he is doing is working—his beers have won multiple awards at

Mexican beer expos, which is where many Mexicans first get exposed to craft beer. Silva says expos have been the main way he has networked to meet other brewers and reach a bigger customer base, and he would participate in more were it not for price.

Where costs are a barrier to brewing, there are government and nonprofit organizations that support local brewers' aspirations. Enrique Robles, the nanobrewer behind Cervecería La Mediagua, was the recipient of a matching grant program through INADEM, the National Institute of Entrepreneurship. "In the program, we learned about breakeven points, business plans, and marketing budgets," says Robles. "Attached to the completion of the workshops is an 80/20 matching grant to launch your entrepreneurial project. In my case, I came up with a makeshift 'go fund me' campaign on Facebook to come up with my 20 percent portion for my little brewery."

"In some ways, I'm lucky to live in Puebla," Robles continues. "Tourism is a big part of our city, so tourists expose us

to new things, like their appreciation for craft beer. I know it sounds silly, but for most of my life I didn't even know beer was something that could be 'made.'"

I tell Robles that it does not sound silly at all and that I was the same way with mac-and-cheese. "Up until my twenties, I had no idea mac-and-cheese could be made with real cheese," I say. I then ask Robles if he thinks anyone can brew.

"Sure, but it's not like in the United States or even Baja California, where there's a huge craft beer market just across the border," Robles says. "I get the sense that in those places, if you make craft beer, someone is bound to buy it. It's not like that here in Puebla. So yes, everyone can brew beer but not everyone can do it well."

Robles sniffs at his beer glass and stares at it, inspecting it against the light. "That's the thing about brewing and any other craft: the art of it is in making it look easy when it's not. It's even harder for the little guys, but as we say in Mexico: *todo se puede* (all is possible)."

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Resources

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