

Kalamazoo Serves As Epicenter Of Michigan Beer Scene

JOHN LIBERTY, MLive.com

KALAMAZOO, Mich. (AP) — In the late 1980s and early '90s, Michigan was a craft-beer desert with a little oasis in the southwest corner of the state.

In the two decades since, Michigan has emerged as a top-five state in the country with well over 100 breweries and has become a destination for "beer-cations," where people plan vacations around beer communities. At the epicenter of the conversation is Bell's Brewery Inc., the state's largest beer maker, and Kalamazoo, home of Bell's Eccentric Cafe.

"Kalamazoo comes up again and again in beer circles as a destination," Julia Herz, craft beer program director for the Boulder, Colo.-based Brewers Association, said.

"You've got yourself a burgeoning beer culture and that's a beautiful thing we're starting to see in pockets around the country, including Kalamazoo," she said.

Herz said Bell's worked as a "heritage brewery" that inspired a micro-culture around it. In addition to Bell's, Kalamazoo also has Bilbo's Pizza, which makes its own beer, and Old Peninsula Brewpub. Boatyard Brewing Co. is poised to start serving beer in the coming months and Arcadia Brewing Co. will open a new production facility and taproom in the city in the summer.

Kalamazoo also features several restaurants and bars, including Shakespeare's Pub, Central City Tap House and Kalamazoo Beer Exchange, among others, that emphasize Michigan craft beer, a relatively new trend in the city. There's also the third annual Kalamazoo Beer Week, to be held Jan. 12-18 at several bars, restaurants and retailers around the city. In its first two years, the event went from around 20 events in 2010 to more than 100 last year.

The city also changed its ordinances to make them more brewery-friendly in an effort to entice more projects.

Adding another unique element to the local beer culture is Hop Head Farms, a 15-acre hop farm in Hickory Corners, about 30 minutes northeast of Kalamazoo, that sells the plant to several Michigan breweries. The farm is in the midst of completing its first harvest season.

"We started with hops in the backyard, inspired by great beer like Bell's beer. I know Arcadia started in Battle Creek, but they tried to start in Kalamazoo. Now they're coming back to Kalamazoo," said Bonnie Steinman, who owns Hop Head Farms with her husband, Jeff.

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"It's a unique atmosphere because a lot of brewers, we've talked to them, they started at Bell's, either started by drinking their first Bell's beer or started working there to learn about brewing. Then they expanded to open more breweries," she continued.

"Grand Rapids has had a big growth of small brewers. In the next year, I think there's going to be five more breweries right in Kalamazoo."

Kalamazoo has a long history with craft beer, dating back to the late 1830s and continuing through 1915. In 1850, there were at least two commercial breweries in the village, according to Keith Howard, of the Kalamazoo Public Library, who published a story chronicling the city's beer history. After 1915, when Kalamazoo County voted to go dry, there seems to be little evidence of a significant craft beer maker until the mid-1980s.

When Rex Halfpenny moved to Michigan in 1988 from the West Coast, a haven for craft beer, he said the state was a "desert." He eventually found the Kalamazoo Brewing Co., which later became Bell's Brewery Inc., and Larry Bell, who sold his first beer in September 1985.

"That was my oasis. Michigan was a beer desert," said Halfpenny, who started the magazine Michigan Beer Guide in 1997.

Bell's continued to "grow with a great deal of pain, effort," Halfpenny said. In 1992, state legislation changed to allow on-premise sales, meaning microbreweries could sell their products directly to customers. Breweries began popping up around Michigan, including Arcadia, one of the top 10 beer producers in the state last year, and Founders Brewing Co., now the second largest in the state, in 1996 and 1997, respectively.

When Halfpenny started his magazine, there were around 30 breweries in Michigan, he said. Today, there are more than 30 breweries within a 45-minute drive of Kalamazoo. West Michigan is home to five of the state's six biggest beer producers in 2011 with Bell's, Founders, Arcadia, Dark Horse Brewing Co. in Marshall and New Holland Brewing Co. in Holland.

In June, The Street, an online financial news site, listed Kalamazoo/Grand Rapids among the site's "10 Best Vacation Cities for Beer Lovers."

"Kalamazoo has a great thing going and so does that whole southwest corner" of Michigan, said Scott Graham, executive director of the Michigan Brewers Guild. "It's one of the best regions for craft beer in the country. Holy cow, those are prominent breweries making some great beer. World class beer, in fact."

Michigan ranks fifth in the United States in total breweries with 102, according to the latest Brewers Association's records, behind California, Washington, Colorado and Oregon (Halfpenny's more up-to-date records say 118 breweries). Michigan ranked 8th in total beer production in the country with its 356,780 barrels in 2011, according to the Brewers Association.

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Bell's accounted for 180,000 barrels in 2011. Its new 200-barrel brewhouse in Comstock Township, opened in the spring, will give it a potential annual capacity of around 800,000 barrels a year.

Arcadia's new facility will give it the potential annual capacity of 60,000 barrels a year. While those numbers may not be achieved for several years, if ever, the demand for the product, both now and in the future, justifies the investments, the owners of each brewery said.

There also is room for craft beer sales growth in Michigan. In terms of off-premise purchases made at supermarkets and other retailers, the other four states ahead of Michigan sell far more craft beer. For example, 40 percent of all beer sales in Oregon were craft beer, Herz said.

Craft beer sales in 2012 will account for a little over 4 percent of total beer sales in the state, according to the Michigan Brewers Guild president Eric Briggeman. That figure was 3.2 percent in 2011, according to Halfpenny. By comparison, it was 0.8 percent of total sales in 1997, Halfpenny said.

Halfpenny said he expects the percentage to grow incrementally for at least the next 10 to 20 years. People making treks, or "beer-cations," to communities like Kalamazoo will also spend money on the same products when they return home, he said.

"Craft beer consumers aren't married to one craft brewery," Halfpenny said. "A craft beer drinker shops and buys a diversity of products. We are beer tourists."

Laura Bell, marketing director for Bell's and the daughter of company president Larry Bell, said more breweries in Kalamazoo or the state is good as long as the quality remains high.

"Brewing is an art form and the people who are doing it need to be passionate about it and make a quality product," she said. "We will survive as a state if that's the main push ... more doesn't always mean better."

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