

Female Brewers Make Their Mark in N. Carolina

TONY KISS, Asheville Citizen-Times

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (AP) — Just a year ago, Leah Tyrell was slinging slices, burgers and nachos as a waitress at Asheville Pizza and Brewing. Now, she's canning and brewing beer for the company, one of a growing number of local women working in the brew industry here.

It can be a tough, backbreaking job, but Tyrell is up for the challenge. "I love the hard work," she said. "I take a lot of pride in the beer here. I've gotten a lot stronger from working here."

Historically, beer has been a business about men — the customers, brewers and distributors have mostly been male. And advertising targeted the male market. But the business is changing on a national and local level.

Western North Carolina is home to about 30 small and regional craft brewers that employ more than 250 workers, a number that is growing. More women have joined the beer workforce in a variety of jobs, in support roles and in management and ownership of breweries.

New Belgium Brewing, which is building its East Coast expansion in West Asheville, is guided by a woman, CEO Kim Jordan.

At Highland Brewing, the city's first craft brewery, Leah Wong Ashburn is poised to take over as president this fall, following her father, company founder Oscar Wong.

A handful of local breweries were started by area women and their husbands or partners. Other women are representing or selling beer around the mountains. All agree that women still make up a small percentage of overall beer employment. Tracking their exact numbers isn't easy.

Nationally, more than 2 million jobs are supported by beer, according to the Brewers Institute trade group. That includes "all aspects of the beer industry and supply chain," spokeswoman Megan Kirkpatrick said. In North Carolina, the number is 65,800, she said. The group does not break out the number by gender.

"I think it has been a boys club," said Anne Fitten Glenn, a spokeswoman for the Oskar Blues brewery in Brevard and author of the book "Asheville Beer: An Intoxicating History of Mountain Brewing." "I do think that it is changing slowly, but it has been a male-dominated field. It's a manufacturing job, and it does require a lot of physical labor. Maybe that's not been attractive to women."

Steph Weber, who with husband Tim, has just opened the Twin Leaf Brewery on Coxe Avenue on Asheville's South Slope suggested "it's a cultural thing." "In times past, drinkers have mostly been male. But that is shifting now, and the people who

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want to work in the industry are shifting, too."

Like many beer industry workers, the Webers got into the business through homebrewing. "After our first batch, we were hooked," she said.

But it can be tough, heaving 50 pound sacks of grain around. "It is pretty physically taxing," she said. "I prefer not to think of myself as a female in the brewing business," but rather a brewery owner and worker, she said. "I feel like pointing out it almost draws more attention to the fact that we are a minority in this business."

Julie Atallah, co-owner of downtown Asheville's Bruisin' Ales beer store, said she doesn't believe that women are "under-represented" in the beer industry. "I think we put too much emphasis on the male/female divide making it harder to notice that the beer business is inclusive, for everyone," she said.

At Highland Brewing, Ashburn watched for years as her father built the company into a regional operation selling beer in nine states. She joined Highland about two and a half years ago and is now vice president for marketing. In October, she will take over as president. "This is a huge, huge responsibility for our team and for who we are in Asheville," she said.

Women have become an important market as customers, Ashburn said.

"Most of the audience is still male, but women and minorities are growing markets. And women are making the decisions in grocery stores. We want to make them happy. Their palates seem to be more sensitive than men's, and they are enjoying the flavors and nuances that they can get from craft beer."

Several women work at Highland Brewing with Ashburn, including Erica Nelson, who handles quality analysis and quality control for the brewery. She is also a trained brewer. Part of her job is to run "sensory panels" three times a week, in which the company staff is trained to detect flavors and aromas in its beers.

"It's a tough job, but I think that women can pick up on the flavors better," she said.

Nelson said she has enjoyed meeting other women in the brewing world. But those opportunities can be few and far between.

Mary Eliza McRae has worked in a variety of beer jobs in and around Asheville, starting in sales at Highland Brewing, then moving to Duck Rabbit, Budweiser of Asheville and now at Rogue, where she represents the brand in four states and the District of Columbia. She said she sees more women "representing breweries and wholesalers."

But Jessica Reiser, co-owner of Burial Beer on the South Slope, said that "in interacting with fellow breweries or brewers, 90 percent if not 100 percent of them are men." She has bonded with Weber, her neighbor.

Kelly Cubbin, of Southern Appalachian Brewery in Hendersonville agreed. "We've

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been doing festivals since 2006," and in the early years there were only a few other women representing breweries, she said.

In Asheville, McRae and other women formed a group called the Beer Divas, which is not currently active.

"We've talked about getting back together," she said. But her job keeps her traveling, leaving less time for friends. She also balances life with her husband Charles and their two children.

Nationally, the Pink Boots Society is a group that represents women in the beer world. It has more than 1,000 members.

Attalah, who was also part of the Asheville Beer Divas, isn't sure that there is a need for a women's beer group. "Personally, I'm often uncomfortable in women's groups," she said. "I'd rather see inclusive education, if that's the goal I've never been able to understand how gender-specific clubs foster a more balanced male/female ratio in the craft beer industry — if that ratio discrepancy even exists versus just perpetuated."

For now, Southern Appalachian is a small operation that includes Kelly Cubbin and her husband Andy. They are entering an intern program with Blue Ridge Community College "and we've had several women apply," she said. "We see a ton of women in our tasting room. Before I got involved (in the brewery), all of my girlfriends said they didn't drink beer. Now, they just love it."

Caroline Forsman, craft beer manager for Empire Distributing, came into the industry through a service job. She draws on her past experience working at the Bier Garden restaurant and the Thirsty Monk pub.

She says that beer is "still considered a male drink," but that has changed a lot in Asheville. "People talk about 'girly' beer but not about 'girly' wines or liquor. We are still dealing with memories of the 1990s and the Swedish Bikini Team that used scantily clad women to sell beer. It used to be that beer was something to drink out of a can or a bottle. It's not the same these days."

In her bartending and managing days, Forsman remembers when some bar customers would seek out a male employee to ask questions. "That is not happening here anymore," she said.

Nicole Dexter, co-owner of Innovation Brewing in Sylva, said women today are "returning to their roots" by joining the beer industry. "In the 18th century, it became more of an industry and a profession, and men took those roles, with less women. But it's really not a man's world anymore."

Many of the local women working in beer also must find times to raise young families. But that is a challenge "in any career," said Weber at Twin Leaf. "We have found a way to make it work."

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