New Mexico Quenches Thirst for Jobs with Craft Brewery Boom

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — That frosty tide of smooth, golden brown craft beer has finally come in, and it's helping to quench this drought-stricken state's thirst for jobs and economic development.

Dozens of microbreweries and taprooms have popped up around New Mexico in recent years, the state's universities and colleges are developing fermentation science programs and other classes aimed at the brewing industry, and local brew masters are bringing home some of the most coveted international accolades for their creations.

"When we keep popping up in the news and bringing home medals, people start scratching their heads and saying 'What's that all about?' They're curious about what's going on in New Mexico," said Chris Goblet, executive director of the New Mexico Brewers Guild.

The brewery scene is anything but new in states such as Oregon, Colorado and California, but federal census data shows the industry continues to boom. There are now more than double the breweries nationwide than there were just five years ago and shipments topped $28 billion in 2012.

A late bloomer, New Mexico represents the frontier of beer, Goblet said.

The state will never have the population to support the hundreds of breweries and taprooms other states have, but industry experts say there's more room at New Mexico's smaller breweries to experiment and create beers that would be hard to replicate elsewhere.

Examples range from the gold-medal IPAs at La Cumbre Brewery in Albuquerque to the IPAs and cactus stout offered by Santa Fe Brewing Co., the lager made with house-roasted green chilies at Roosevelt Brewing Co. in Portales and the native-hops-infused brews crafted by the monks at the Christ in the Desert Monastery in northern New Mexico.

New Mexico's three dozen breweries employ thousands of workers and have an economic impact of some $265 million, according to the national Brewers Association. While New Mexico is nowhere near the top when it comes to state rankings, elected leaders say the potential cannot be ignored given that more than a dozen new breweries are in the planning stages, and some established breweries want to open new taprooms and distribute their products beyond the state's borders.

Just last month, Gov. Susana Martinez and other state officials turned out for a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the expansion of Blue Heron Brewery in Espanola.

The neighborhood used to be dead, said Sen. Richard Martinez, D-Espanola.

"This new brewery comes in. It's serving food and it's packed. It has revitalized part of our town," he said.

It's the same scenario in the state's largest city, where breweries and taprooms have spurred new commercial and residential interest in industrial areas near downtown and other parts of the city that are now on the list of hot spots.

Sen. Jacob Candelaria, D-Albuquerque, said food trucks are now fixtures along the brewery circuit and other small businesses are opening to fill the need for packaging and distributing.

Santa Fe Brewing Co, the state's oldest brewery, has plans for a $10 million expansion.

Alana Jones, the brewery's general manager, described the industry's growth as phenomenal. Just eight years ago, the brewery had a handful of employees. Now, there are 40.

David Hargis, head brewer at Tractor Brewing in Albuquerque, said his two-employee operation has grown from 350 barrels a year in 2010 to about 4,000 barrels and 80 employees.

One of the newer operations in Santa Fe, Duel Brewing, has started an online fundraising campaign aimed at boosting production threefold. At the monastery, the Abbey Beverage Co. is busy shipping the monk's beer as far as Ohio and Arkansas and has just released a new signature beer.

State legislators are considering changes to state liquor laws, and Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, said they need to be careful not to put up any walls that would discourage the burgeoning industry or hamper its ability to export home-grown beers.

"This could be a wonderful thing for New Mexico," Padilla said.

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