

COVER STORY

The Secret to World-Class Brewing is...LOVE

by Daniel Drennon

In my travels throughout the wealth of wonderful small breweries in the greater Los Angeles area, I often get asked by beer fans, “What is the best small brewery in LA?” I usually test them by grinning and answering, “The Propagator.” They excitedly ask where it is and are surprised when I answer Venice.

Now many of you know this is a playful trick on my part since The Propagator is mighty Firestone Walker’s research and development brewhouse accompanied by a lovely restaurant in Venice. But while every industry insider well knows of the phenomenal beers being brewed there by Sam Tierney, the vast majority of everyday beer drinkers are unaware.

So, if you are one of the many who don’t know that Firestone Walker is brewing small batch beers at The Propagator, this is your official heads up and invite to make the trek to west LA no matter how near or far you may reside. I promise you that you will not be disappointed.

Here is my interview with the artist behind these local liquid gems. And, oh yeah, The Propagator does also offer a full line up of all of those Firestone Walker beers you do know and love.

DRENNON: *What is your title at The Propagator and to whom do you report?*

TIERNEY: I am the Propagator Brewery Manager and report to our Brewmaster Matt Brynildson.

DRENNON: *What was your training and career path to getting the job?*

TIERNEY: I got really into trying and rating new beers back in the Rate Beer/Beer Advocate era while I was in college in 2007. I was in Sweden for a semester at Lund University and started looking up all the weird beers available at the Systembolaget, which is the state monopoly liquor store over there. I mostly got really into Belgian beers and a few Scandinavian craft beers at the time but also German and Czech beers. When I got home in

2008, I decided to get some books and take a serious go at homebrewing. In my last semester at UCSB in 2009, I volunteered a bit at Telegraph Brewing and that experience convinced me that I wanted to be a professional brewer.

I attended the International Diploma program at Siebel and Doemens in the fall of 2010 and then went back home to Santa Cruz and applied at a bunch of breweries, getting a few interviews before landing a brewer position at Firestone Walker. I started in May 2011 and rotated between the shift brewing positions for three years before being promoted to QC Brewer, which handled yeast and other special projects like barrel-aging and small batch stuff. I did that for another three years before being promoted to Cellar Manager and overseeing all cold-side operations from fermentation up to packaging. After a couple years as Cellar Manager, the Venice job opened up at The Propagator and my wife was interested in moving to LA so I took the opportunity to make the move down here.

DRENNON: *Do you develop all of the recipes for the Research & Development (R&D) beers brewed at The Propagator?*

TIERNEY: Some of the recipes are more collaborative with the Paso team, especially beers that are specifically intended to be impending releases up there. Matt still has a strong influence on the direction that those beers go. Others are more esoteric ideas that I have or that are suggested to me, and in that case, I typically come up with new recipes to work those ideas out. In many cases it can be as simple as trying out new ingredients that we are interested in and coming up with a fun beer to showcase them. I mostly draw on a firmly established house style to recipe construction but also like to continuously work in new techniques and ingredients that I see from other brewers and want to try.

DRENNON: *What do you feel is the key to being great at recipe development?*



Sam Tierney (Propagator Brewery Manager) Photo Courtesy of Firestone Walker



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Sam Tierney, Matt Brynildson, & Vinnie Cilurzo on STiVO brew day

Photo Credit: Daniel Drennon

TIERNEY: I think it comes down to knowing what you are going to get out of your ingredients and how to use them to achieve that goal. That can be a challenge considering the immense range of possibilities, but I find that tradition is very useful to get you close to a target. If you start with classic ingredients/formulations for a given style and then deliberately work your way to your target with ingredients that you are familiar with, you can be very precise in crafting flavor profiles.

DRENNON: What are the other key components to brewing world class beer?

TIERNEY: Precise process control is huge. Control allows you to express your vision in an accurate way. It doesn't help much to have an idea for the world's greatest beer if you can't precisely control your ingredients and process to achieve that goal. You also can't discount a good palate. You need to know what tastes good in order to do the difficult sensory work to tweak your way to your goal. You can brew technically sound beer by developing great process, but you need the means to put it all together via sensory to make beer that delights. This is where a good sensory program is vital because you can't always trust one person's palate to be an infallible

guide, even if they are a uniquely gifted taster.

DRENNON: Tell us about the Kaspar Schulz brewhouse and what advantages it offers a brewer.

TIERNEY: Schulz is on the forefront of brewhouse technology, especially in the small brewery space, so you get a lot of the design aspects of a larger brewhouse in a small system. We have an external wort boiler that provides a very energy-efficient and gentle boil, and the 3-vessel setup allows us to do step-mashing and decoctions.



Sam Tierney

Photo Courtesy of Firestone Walker

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Beer Paper at STiVO canning day

Photo Credit: Daniel Drennon

(COVER STORY continued)

We run the brewhouse on the same software we use in Paso, so we have a lot of automation for a small brewery that helps ensure we are hitting our numbers on every brew.

DRENNON: *How much interaction do you have with Firestone Walker brewmaster Matt Brynildson?*

TIERNEY: Matt and I can get pretty involved with some of the projects down here, especially collaborations, but we also go through stints where he is happy to give us a little more space and let us do our thing once we go over the basic schedule and ideas for new beers. I think we have a balance that works well for everyone.

DRENNON: *Do you feel like the mothership in Paso Robles allows you to be both autonomous and creative?*

TIERNEY: The way we have it set up, I do have a lot of autonomy, but the biggest constraint is probably keeping our three taprooms happy. I know we are being too out there when we start piling up new releases. We sometimes have over 30 beers on tap so things can get lost in the shuffle and there can be some internal competition for sales. I like to make sure that Propagator beers are selling well, and that means not always brewing more esoteric beers, but really drilling down to what is currently exciting drinkers. We hope that releasing interesting and engaging beers here drives more business to the taprooms so it's not a zero-sum game with our other beers

DRENNON: *What is the process for any of your R&D beers brewed in Venice to be elevated to the main FW line up?*

TIERNEY: Most beers start 1-2 years ahead of an expected launch and then we start working based on the idea of what we want to release. That might mean brewing a new beer in a style we want to explore, or taking a beer we previously made and tweaking it in a new direction. Beers like Citrus Cyclone or Welcome to LA evolved over many months as we were figuring them out brew by brew and letting the process evolve naturally based on internal feedback. With a beer like Hopnosis we had a clear goal in mind from the outset and only did a couple of rounds of trials before we settled on what was essentially the final product. Of course, it also takes time to dial in a recipe in Paso. Recipes never scale perfectly, even with all the same ingredients and a similar brewhouse setup.

DRENNON: *What is your favorite thing about brewing? And least favorite?*

TIERNEY: Favorite would have to be seeing people enjoy the beers we make. All the hard work is worth that moment when a group of friends are enjoying a round and having a great time. My least favorite is automation equipment failures. That's the downside of an automated system. Sometimes a tiny sensor failing on the brewhouse will ruin your whole week. It'll make you wish you could just start opening valves by hand and keep brewing.

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2022 Pivo pilsner

Photo Credit: Matthew Garcia @momentsinbeer

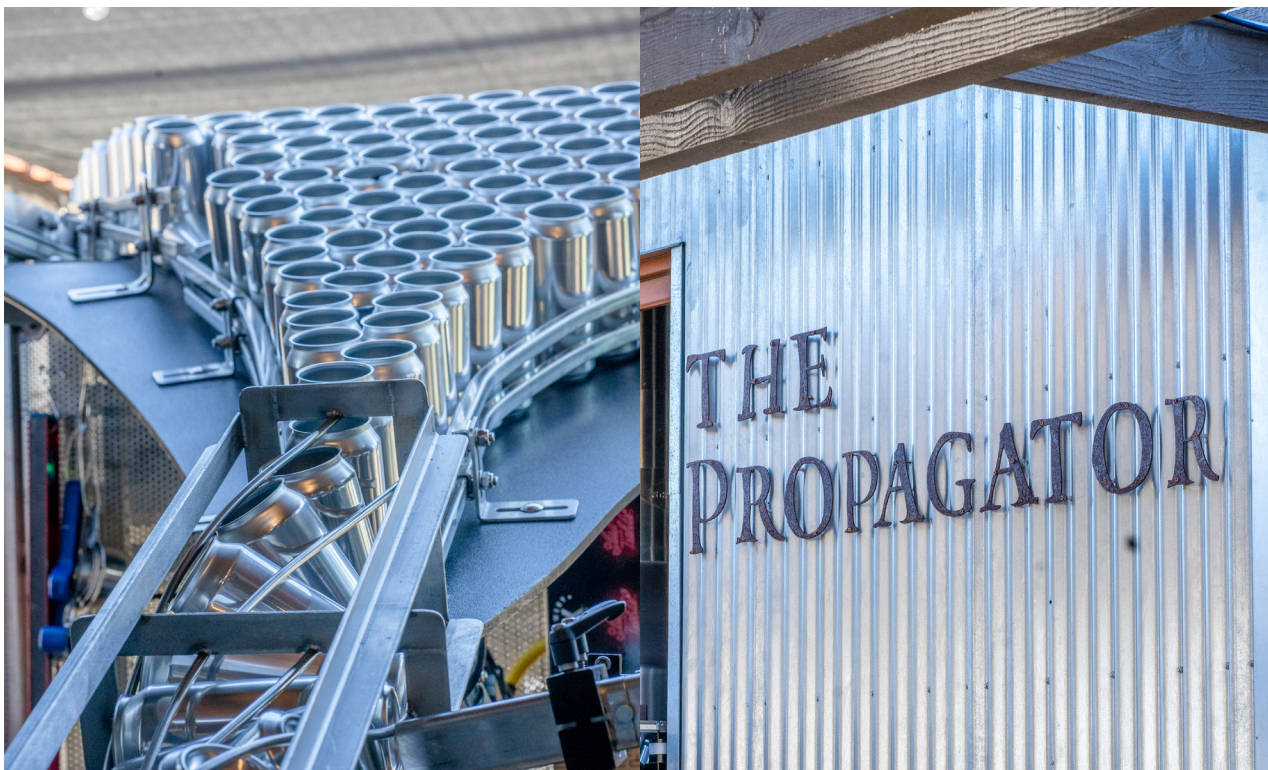
DRENNON: What was original concept for the brewhouse at The Propagator? Was it always to be R&D beers since I know you also get to brew some of the classics such as Wookey Jack that have been dropped from the mass distribution line up?

DRENNON: Do you have any beers that you consider to be your own personal favorites or even signature beers?

TIERNEY: As soon as the scope of the brewery became clear based on the amount of space we had to build it, we knew that we were going to utilize it to make some of the old classics and taproom favorites, as well as develop new beers. Wookey Jack was the first beer we brewed down here, so we could assess a known recipe that's also a little more forgiving than something like 805 or Pivo. We have 20BBL tanks that we can double-batch into, which is way more than you need for strict R&D work but perfect for supplying our taprooms.

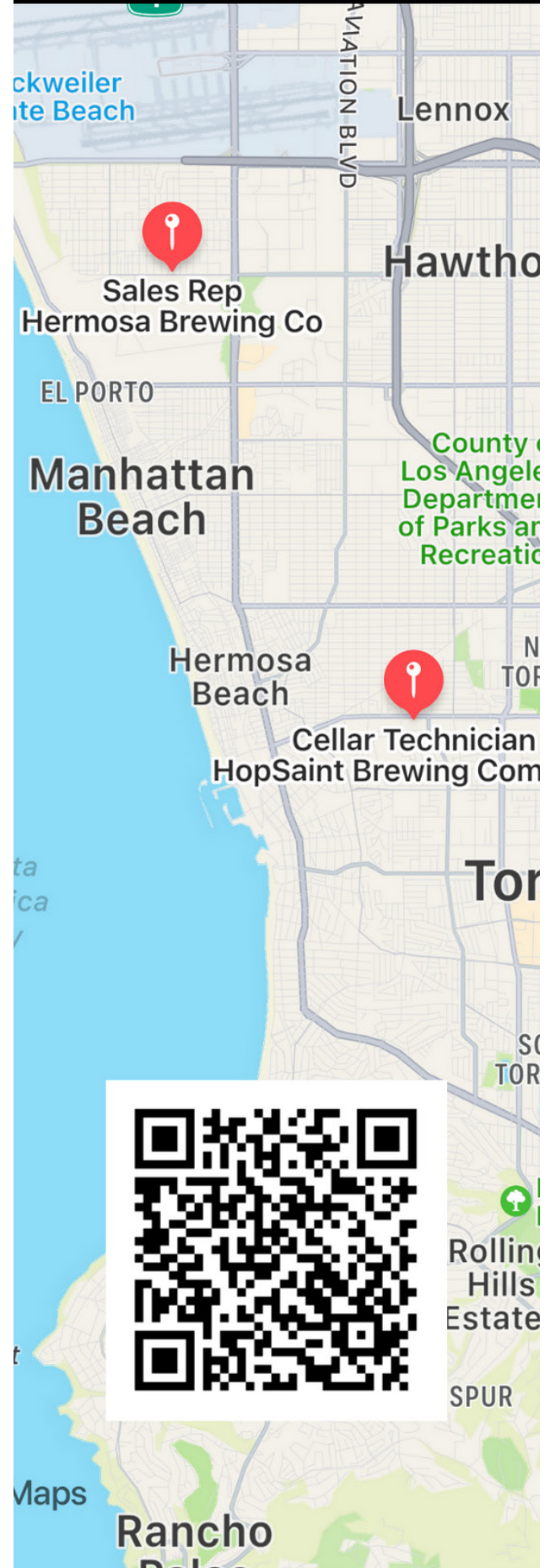
TIERNEY: Welcome to LA was the first beer that I started working on when I moved down and took a little over two years to develop into what we are brewing now for distribution. The only other beer that I have brewed more of is Gen 1, which was the first original recipe we started brewing here back in 2016. We riffed on it for anniversary beers but always kept the original recipe essentially the same. When I moved down, I started doing more riffing within that framework, like switching base malts or trying new yeast strains, and now we have a whole family of beers based on the original idea

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Boomhut Mobile Canning of 2022 Pivo pilsner

Photo Credit: Matthew Garcia @momentsinbeer





WHAT
BREWING
COMING SOON

Boomhut Mobile Canning of 2022 Pivo pilsner

Photo Credit: Matthew Garcia @momentsinbeer

(COVER STORY continued)

of a Mosaic/Citra unfiltered IPA. I really enjoy figuring out what the next version is going to be and am lucky that it's always a popular hop combo.

DRENNON: *You do quite a few collabs at The Propagator with other world class brewers, most recently the phenomenal STiVO collab with Vinnie Cilurzo of Russian River Brewing. What do you see as the biggest value and/or reward from such collabs, other than causing your marketing team to salivate?*

TIERNEY: Can you put a price on spending the day with a brewer like Vinnie? He's such an open, generous guy as well. For collaborations in general I think they present a unique opportunity to spend quality time with other brewers just focused on learning how they brew. We always collaborate with brewers whose beer we love and have a lot of respect for, so I am always eager to learn as much as I can from them, and hopefully share

as much as I can about what we do as well. It's also just a genuinely great time getting to spend the day with others who share your passion.

DRENNON: *What advice would you give to young brewers who have aspirations to go pro?*

TIERNEY: I think most aspiring brewers imagine working at a small place where it feels more like homebrewing, but the best opportunities in many cases are going to be at larger breweries where there are more jobs and a fast-paced work environment. I would look for any way to get in the door and then master each opportunity you are given. If you are killing it washing kegs and your passion and positivity rub off on everyone, more opportunities will come your way. Brewing is truly a craft and even an experienced homebrewer will have a steep learning curve when they start in a commercial brewery. You really just need to start on the ground floor and master your

craft through hours and hours of hard work. Brewing school is a good formal option to increase your skills but you need to weigh that investment versus other options. There are so many great books and on-line resources these days as well

DRENNON: *Between talent and work ethic, which do you think is most important?*

TIERNEY: I think you can't deny

that both are needed. Talent is easily wasted if not correctly applied, but hard work needs proper direction in order to effectively achieve. Maybe love is the real key? If you love what you do, you'll find the motivation to focus your ability and keep improving.

DRENNON: *If you have to describe yourself in one word or phrase, what would it be?*

Curious.



Matt Brynildson on STiVO brew day

Photo Courtesy of Firestone Walker

