

## COVER STORY

## WILD FIELDS GOLD RUSH

by Daniel Drennon

At the recent World Beer Cup awards ceremony in Minneapolis, Wild Fields Brewhouse, a relatively new brewpub in Atascadero (California Central Coast) won not one, not two, not three...but four Gold medals. It was, simply put, a stunning achievement.

Ryan Fields, the masterful brewer who co-owns Wild Fields with his wife Jacque, honed his craft here in Southern California for over a decade at such revered breweries as Port/The Lost Abbey, Pizza Port and Beachwood Blendery.

Along that impressive path, Fields made a name for himself by winning six medals:

Pizza Port: Nerf Herder English Mild – Bronze World Beer Cup 2012; Order in the Port American Stout – Gold GABF 2013; and, Way Heavy Scotch Ale – Gold GABF 2013.

Beachwood Blendery: Chaos is a Friend of Mine – Belgian Style Sour – Silver GABF 2016;

Dia De Los Mangos - Chili Sour – Bronze GABF 2017; and, Funk Yeah - Belgian-Style Sour – Gold GABF 2018.

Jacque Fields path was similarly impressive, learning her chops at legendary destination beer bar Beachwood BBQ in Seal Beach from 2006 to 2012, serving as Associate Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County from 2012 to 2017, and then Executive Director of the Orange County Brewers Guild from 2017 to 2018.

**DRENNON:** *Ryan, Jacque attended World Beer Cup carrying around a cardboard cut-out of you. I presume you had to stay behind to take care of your kids and run the brewery. Were you watching the live feed at least? Please share the emotions you were feeling as the medals were announced.*

**RYAN:** I've been to CBC and WBC many times, and part of the motivation to start a brewery together was so we could share in these fun activities. So yeah, it was Jacque's long overdue turn to make the trip, and we weren't quite in a position yet to both make it.



**GOLD GOLD GOLD GOLD!!!!** Ryan and Jacque Fields, co-owners of Wild Fields Brewhouse All Photos Courtesy of Wild Fields

It was nice getting to watch the live feed with the team here and some of our regulars. The first award was definitely the best, because after that point you're way more relaxed and the rest are just bonuses. Every time we got an award I ran around and gave every person in the building a high five. It was magical and I honestly don't know how we pulled it off. Gonna be hard to top!

**DRENNON:** *Talk about each of the beers that won a World Beer Cup Gold medal.*

**RYAN:** Atascadero Beach Mexican Lager – LOVE that this beer got a medal. We just started making it year-round as our only beer that can be a permanent handle. It's been hugely successful for us here on the central coast, and it has the name of our city in the brand!

Pine Mountain Monolith English Brown Ale – Stoked for this one as it got Gold at the CA Craft Brewers Cup and GABF last year! It's on a hot streak.

Magic Swirling Sip Scottish Ale – I brewed this beer specifically to enter at World Beer Cup. Seemed like a style that we could win, and I've always wanted to make a Scottish Ale. This ended up being a very popular beer at the pub.

Three Bridges American Brown Ale – The third of the 'landmark' beers that won for us, as Three Bridges is a local hiking trail. I was most confident in this batch going into the competition. Had the perfect balance of chocolate malt and citrusy hop character.

**DRENNON:** *Jax, what was it like being there in person and hearing Wild Fields again and again?*

**JACQUE:** Surreal! My favorite part of competitions is seeing friends win. We were sitting with the Pizza Port crew so the celebrations and hugs seemed endless. The first gold for Atascadero Beach in Cream Ale was all the joy I could have asked for; Kayla, our Assistant Brewer, and I were crying and hugging. I could barely breathe. Cream Ale category isn't an easy one!

I was already on a cloud when we won English Brown, on the way up to the stage I just kept saying "is this real?". After that I may have gone into shock... After Scottish Ale I texted Ryan with "WTF is happening?". And then Three Bridges Brown was literally overload. Afterwards, we walked out with the four medals and at one point Kayla and I just sat on the lobby floor staring at the boxes.

**DRENNON:** *Ryan, tell me about growing up. What were you into? How did it shape you into who you are now? Who and/or what inspires you?*

**RYAN:** I was an extremely shy kid and grew up on an abalone farm three miles from the nearest neighbor. I excelled in school, and was really into physics and music, so much so that I had a very hard time choosing a path for college. I chose physics, but after college felt like I was missing a passion for what I was doing. Brewing inspires me so much because of the balance of science and art. It satisfies both sides of my brain.





**DRENNON:** *What was your training and path to become a brewer? Have you had mentors? Who are they and what did they teach you?*

RYAN: My start in this industry was one of those right place right time moments when the Lost Abbey needed some help on the bottling line, and I needed a part time job while I finished college. It was still a very small operation then, and Tomme (famed Lost Abbey owner/brewmaster Tomme Arthur) took me under his wing and I was quickly moved into positions involving brewing and barrel work. It was there that I developed a strong passion for making Belgian-inspired sour beers, and also gained most of my

base knowledge about brewing. When a Head Brewer position opened up at Pizza Port San Clemente it seemed like great step for me and, luckily, I got the spot. San Clemente is pretty far from the other ‘Ports’ so I was given a lot of autonomy, but learned a lot from the other brewers there at the time; namely Jeff Bagby and Yiga Miyashiro. Sour beer took a back burner position but I was able to hone my skills at making beer on a pub system. After a few years I was ready to move to the next step and heard about Beachwood opening a facility dedicated to Belgian-inspired sours. I was stoked when Gabe (Gordon) and Julian (Shrago) offered me the opportunity to

help build out the Blendery program and be the Head Brewer. At this point Jacque and I were already planning long term to move up to the Central Coast so the Blendery position had a timeline built in. My time there was amazing and I was able to learn so much about making Belgian-inspired beers, mainly due to the large amount of risk Gabe was willing to take to get it right. I gleaned a lot of knowledge from both Gabe and Julian, and honed in my palate a lot tasting through barrels so often. I also got to be involved with more of the business management which proved to be very helpful when starting up Wild Fields.

**DRENNON:** *Jax, you’re an industry veteran as well. Tell us about your journey in the beer industry? What skills did you learn along the way that helped you start and run Wild Fields?*

JACQUE: I happened upon a serving job at Beachwood BBQ in Seal Beach through a dishwasher I had worked with before. Beachwood had been open maybe a month at that point. I was only 20 at the time, and we had rotating craft beer taps. In 2006, that wasn’t the norm. I got to learn all about beer styles and brewing concepts from Gabe (owner Gabe Gordon) and our guests. Beachwood was the

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(COVER STORY continued)

first place I ever felt surrounded by people like me. We are all weird and loved talking over and about a great craft beer; I credit this time as my most formative years in being who I am today. I was there through the expansion from eight tables and three barstools with only eight taps to a full bar and dining room and 21 taps. I was able to learn what an evolving restaurant from the ground up looked like; it wasn't always a walk in the park but we strived to be excellent in what we did and I lived for that.

I was going to UC Irvine when I met Ryan and relocated to San Clemente while he worked at Pizza Port San Clemente. I would pick up shifts and got to see a different beer service model. I also helped get Ryan beer placements in local craft beer spots when I was commuting. I learned how to work festivals then and just really knew I loved everything about this industry but I wanted to see where my degree in Urban Studies and Community Development would take me.

I was offered a full time with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County,

working my way from Customer Relations Specialist to Associate Director of Community Based Programs; in my time there I was able to develop our sponsorships with breweries and events and help grow the organizations mentorship program – my time there was phenomenal and I learned so much about how non-profits worked. At this point Ryan was working at Beachwood Blendery and we had made a plan to start our own brewery in the future. I knew I wanted to move fulltime into beer but I wasn't sure where I would fit so I asked for a job at Beachwood again and along came the opening for the Executive Director of the Orange County Brewers Guild. I was so nervous for my interview and grateful when I was offered the position! My two-years there were some of the best for shaping my vision for our operations. I was able to expand my network in the industry and learn how to run a board of directors, financials, events, promotions, an entire internal and external membership program. I wasn't ready to leave but life put a great brewpub location in our path for Wild Fields so we had to take it! Today, I run our kitchen, financials, HR, operations, staffing and marketing.



Wild Fields Brewhouse game area

All Photos Courtesy of Wild Fields

**DRENNON:** *When did you first conceive of the idea to open your own brewery and why Atascadero?*

JACQUE: I never dreamed of owning a brewery until Ryan and I got together; I don't think either of us did until we met. It was one of those things that comes up when you're both working in it; what we loved, what we were struggling with, what we dreamed of, it just became part of us. We would jokingly say 'when we have our own brewery' and at some point, it just became a reality that someday we would do this thing. We had a couple opportunities but our visions didn't align. We knew we wanted to raise kids near family so we decided we would make it happen on the Central Coast to be closer to Ryan's side. We had visited Atascadero many times to see his mom and sister. We met with the City of Atascadero, they loved our concept and had great manufacturing locations in downtown, had experience opening breweries before through their permits department, and connected us with the perfect location. Let's just say the stars aligned and here we are.

**DRENNON:** *What is the vibe at Wild Fields, and how does it fit into the community?*

JACQUE: I like to say we are founded on a brewery, but we are all about community. Ryan and I love how much beer can impact the local community so we do our best to partner with causes that speak to us. We also want the brewery to be a nod to the history of pubs. It's a watering hole

where everyone feels welcome. In addition to Ryan's 20 beer taps, we have wine, rotating cider and seltzer, non-alcoholic craft beer, local craft soda and more. I call the food menu homestyle pub-grub. It's inspired by my family and food I love having a beer with – the menu spans the board from a vegan carrot dog that we make in house to a loaded mac & cheese with kielbasa and bacon you can make "buffalo style." I am all about making people feel welcome and comfortable and I hope our entire concept speaks to that.

**DRENNON:** *Ryan, do you have a brewing philosophy?*

RYAN: At Wild Fields our favorite word to use to describe our beer is 'balance'. We want all of the flavors and aromas to be in harmony with each other, to create a completely drinkable and enjoyable experience. We tend to lean toward the traditional styles, and love having a wide range of beers on tap, from Blonde Ale, to West Coast IPA, Brown Ale, Belgians, Sours, etc. We do some experimenting here and there as well, especially with our barrel program. We have a Belgian-Style Sour Ale with Viognier Grapes and Nelson Hops coming out soon. The combination developed some amazing flavors! We also tap a new cask every Thursday and play around with fun experimental additions in those. Overall, we just want to have a beer for everyone. There's rarely an occasion where we can't find a beer that someone will like.

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Ryan and Jacque Fields

**DRENNON:** *What have been your most important lessons learned as a brewer and what advice would you give to aspiring brewers?*

RYAN: The biggest piece of advice that I usually give to brewers when training is this. You're gonna make mistakes. That's part of the learning process. The most important thing is how you react to those mistakes, and how you use them to move forward. And ideally, you can start to learn big lessons from small mistakes. The expert is just the person who's already made all the mistakes.

The most common advice that I got from my mentors before starting Wild Fields was "Don't Do It!", and this is probably the advice I would give a lot of people. Not because you shouldn't do it, you just need to realize how hard it is, and have an unstoppable drive and passion to the point that not succeeding isn't an option.

**DRENNON:** *You are a musician and I'm always fascinated by the nexus between being a musician and brewer. Tell us about that.*

RYAN: I keep music as my fun hobby, my escape from reality, my zen moments. Untouched by money and responsibility. I think I have just as much passion for music as I do for brewing, I just spend a LOT more time brewing and I'm better at it. I still dream of doing something with music, like being a song writer. I don't have the personality to be a performer.

**DRENNON:** *Jax, what is your short- and long-term vision for Wild Fields?*

JACQUE: Short-term I am focusing on building up our team so Ryan and I don't have to be here so much – if I can inspire folks the way we were inspired by our past employers I will consider that a win. Long-term I see us looking at possible off-site concepts using the production from our location here. But as our friend Val says "Viva la Wild Fields" and we are going to take the ride.

In ten years, I see Wild Fields training up our kids to be hard workers! I am really looking forward to them being old enough to be a part of this business! I hope that we can keep our passion going and spread that to the local community. If we can be a place that folks know and trust to try weird stuff that we want to make, that is going to feel pretty great.

**DRENNON:** *Jax, what are your influences on the beer side of Wild Fields? What are your favorite styles of beer?*

JACQUE: That's a tough one! I really just try and let Ryan do his thing. I give him feedback and sometimes he listens to me. Like when I said, I love our 4101 Hoppy Pale Ale but I want something more crushable like Sierra Nevada Pale Ale but with a touch less malt. A few weeks later, he sampled me on Porch Drinkin', our crushable pale ale. I find myself just always looking forward to coming up with a concept and having Ryan make it a reality. I like to say that I

don't discriminate against any beer, I definitely lean towards west coast IPA's but I love variety.

**DRENNON:** *What collaborations have you done so far and why do you like collaborating?*

RYAN: We don't have a ton of time for collaborations these days, but we probably do on average one a month. We collab with a lot of local breweries we are developing friendships with, as well as breweries we've been friends with forever. We love collaborating because that's how you learn new things. We didn't get here by ourselves, we learned from people we admire, and also pushed the boundaries and experimented with our peers. The beer community is an amazing and open place, and collaborations are a window into that for the consumer. They are also a great way to get introduced to a new pool of customers. Plus, it's just really fun to hang out and make a beer with friends.

**DRENNON:** *Between talent and work ethic, which is more important?*

RYAN: Work Ethic. Especially in this industry. It's a LOT of work. Seems to me that most of the people that make it in this industry are the ones that work

the hardest. That being said, work/life balance is extremely important, and very hard to manage in this business. Not burning out is key.

JACQUE: I also say work ethic. Heck, I never was a chef by trade but give me some time and determination and I now have a killer crew we have grown up from scratch. I hire for work ethic.

**DRENNON:** *If you, Ryan, weren't a brewer and you, Jacque, weren't the CEO of Wild Fields, what would you each be instead?*

RYAN: I could see myself being a scientist studying psychedelics and/or dreams. Or someone that just buys old houses, fixes them up, and flips them. Jax and I are constantly doing home improvement projects.

JACQUE: Based on my degree, I would have probably stayed in non-profit world or worked for a City or County government.

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

RYAN: A confidently quiet intellectual artist and family man

JACQUE: I am absolutely fabulous.

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