



# VICTOR THE INNOVATOR

Victor Novak

Photo Courtesy of Figueroa Mountain Brew Co

by Tomm Carroll

If Victor Novak, one of Southern California's most acclaimed and enduring lager brewers, were to have a Doppelbock named in his honor, it would have to be called "Innovator." And not just because it

conforms to the -ator suffix of all beer monikers for that German-style, dark, sweet and strong lager since the turn of the 20th century, but because it actually describes what kind of brewer he is. So it should come as no surprise

to anyone who is paying attention that in early November he was named Director of Innovation for Figueroa Mountain Brewing's three new Los Angeles brewpubs.

Those small breweries/restaurants, just acquired

in June through a partnership with Artisanal Brewers Collective (ABC), founded by LA craft beer entrepreneur Tony Yanow, are (and will soon be) Sherman Oaks' Bluebird Brasserie (to become the German bier-

focused Lagerhaus), West LA's Stalking Horse (the forthcoming Mexican cerveza-oriented Agua Santa Cerveceria) and Westwood Village's Broxton (Fig Mtn University).

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## BREWER'S CORNER

# LIMITATIONS, DESPERATION AND KVEIK

by Justin Mazorlig and Calen Rau



Justin Mazorlig

Photo Credit: Dennis Benson

Looking back at our brewery -- Common Corners in Walnut -- on our one-year anniversary, I realized that it might have actually been a good thing that I didn't come from a commercial brewing background. I didn't realize how strange our style was until professional brewers began coming through and commenting how unorthodox some of my techniques were. Kveik yeast provides a good window into that style.

I started Common Corners with essentially just three unitanks. I didn't have the budget or the space for anything else - I was just a homebrewer who'd cashed in his savings to chase a dream. If you haven't been in before, the entire brewery sits in what used to be a strip mall Subway, to give you a sense of scale. Though we had a lot of ambition, we lacked experience. The brew side of the operation was all me (Justin). Homebrewing is one thing, brewing on a commercial system is entirely different. I didn't even have temperature control or a glycol system at opening.

This brings me back to kveik yeast. It saved our butt in the first few months of opening. If you are not familiar, kveik is a Norwegian farmhouse yeast that ferments quickly and at very high temperatures. I had used kveik yeast before in homebrewing, probably first sometime around 2018. I liked how the high fermentation temperature and the esters it kicked off. What I didn't realize at the time was the intended use of the yeast, which is traditionally farmhouse styles. Back then, I hardly knew anything about traditional brewing, much less the nuances of different styles. I also hadn't realized that kveik had largely gone out of fashion for commercial brewers and wasn't commonly used. From what I understand, it has a bit of a negative stigma.

When I started brewing beers for our soft opening in November 2021, I was only using kveik. I didn't realize this was abnormal, especially using kveik in all of your beers. I'd pitch the yeast at 80°F and let it rip, getting up and sometimes above 100°F. I'd then let it drop to room temperature after it finished fermenting. The beers would

finish in three days. I had done this at home with a 1/2 HP glycol chiller for my 15-gallon unitank in the garage. Now I was working with 3 BBL tank. It would take two days just to drop from 70°F to 34°F. I would either hook those up to IPA tanks or for the cleaner beers, keg them at room temperature. Many of you reading are probably already horrified, but I simply didn't know any better.

In those first few months, the yeast stayed the same. All kveik. The grain bill and hops were what was changing the style of the beer, at least as I understood it. I was making an array of IPAs, stouts, and even a pseudo-pilsner. But, what this allowed me to do was to flip a tank in 3-7 days, depending on the beers. Longer turnarounds were usually just a byproduct of dry hopping. In such a tiny space, maintaining inventory is a huge problem. This method allowed us to have six, seven, or even eight beers on tap at a time. While it didn't allow for maximum variety on the menu, with a little creativity kveik can produce enough variations to satisfy most of the clientele. This increased inventory led to sales, which in turn allowed us to buy more unitanks (we now have six) and a legitimate glycol chiller that could actually properly chill a 3 BBL tank.

In those early days, kveik gave Common Corners beers a unique flavor profile. Surprisingly, some of our most popular beers were just kveik yeast and pilsner malt. Sometimes limitations and desperation can be the bringer of ingenuity. In many ways that is the story of Common Corners. Keeping the yeast the same allowed me to play around with other ingredients, honing my abilities and understanding of the importance of hops, malt, and water, while still having enough product to keep the doors open. Quick turnarounds also meant that the menu at the brewery was always changing, which was appealing to our regulars and continued to challenge us to innovate.

At the one-year mark, I look back at those early menus and the notes from the first brew days and can't help but laugh. Since then, I've learned a lot. Common Corners beers are light

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Common Corners brews

Photo Credit: Justin Mazorlig



Justin Mazorlig

Photo Credit: Dennis Benson

years beyond where they were then. Kveik is no longer the heart and soul of the menu - it's only used in a few of our rotating beers nowadays. We brew far more lagers (with actual lager yeast) and beers with lower ABVs. This said, Common Corners wouldn't be where it is now without that Norwegian yeast. It is a good reminder that for those of us working on super small systems, you need to be creative to keep your base happy and the beer flowing. While I might not suggest a flagship kveik pseudo-

pils, the yeast can be used to produce very serviceable blonde or pale ale that can still be made quite crisp with the right ingredients. If you find yourself in a similar situation and need some product, let it rip!

*Justin Mazorlig is the owner, head brewer and Kveik savant at Common Corners Brewing, located at 20265 Valley Boulevard, Suite M, in Walnut.*

*Calen Rau is consigliere to Justin Mazorlig and number one fan at Common Corners.*

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DISCOVER GREAT BEER

LA BEAT

COMMUNITY FIRST AT WHITTIER BREW CO.

by Brooke Fallon Scheer

Whittier Brewing Company, the brain child of two passionate craft beer enthusiasts and one restaurateur, was the first craft brewery to bring locally made craft beer to the Whittier community. John Kennedy, Ed Hernandez, Ricardo Diaz, and Don Marla are the ambitious owners of this eclectic brewery brought together through a common interest in solid beer and delicious food.

Sitting in the heart of Uptown Whittier, The Nixon Plaza is a Beaux Arts Neoclassical architecture style building and is a registered National Historic Landmark. Built in 1923, this near 50,000 square foot building was the first law office of U.S. President Richard Nixon (hence its name), and boasts a myriad of local businesses including three residential kitchens offering phenomenal craft BBQ (Pit & Bull), wood fired pizza (La Crosta), Mexican vegan food (La Cena), a well-curated wine bar, bakery,

arcade games, and a beautiful outside patio. This is truly a haven for the community brought by the community.

This passion project was a long time coming, taking about two and a half years from conception to open, only to be closed just three months after opening due to the impending pandemic. Through sheer tenacity and devotion, Whittier Brew Co. survived this challenging time and navigated their way from humble beginnings to full-fledged business-owning brew masters.

I had the privilege to sit down with Ed and John, the talented brewers and operating owners of Whittier Brew Co. to learn more about their journey and insights on this now thriving business.

BEER PAPER: What initially got you into craft beer?

John: The Bottle Room and Moose Drool. In a time when craft beer in



John Kennedy, Ricardo Diaz, and Ed Hernandez
All Photos Courtesy of Whittier Brewing Co

LA was not on the map, The Bottle Room had exclusive allocations and relationships with prestigious breweries from the likes of Russian River, Logsdon, Almanac, Firestone, and El Segundo, to name a few, and was the first in the area to really expose the Whittier community to

renowned craft beer. I went to many of their tap takeovers and was honored to meet the brewers of many of these breweries. I asked them, "Oh, how did you get into this?" Their simple answer? "With home brewing." It piqued my interest and I began to home brew. Eight or nine years later, here we are.

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Melissa Villasenor, John Kennedy, Javier Marquez, Ashley Kenneip, and Ed Hernandez

Ed: Commercial wise I was into English and Irish beers like Boddington's and Guinness. One day, I was at World Market, and I saw Rogue's, Dead Guy Ale, and the label intrigued me. Once I tried it, the aggressiveness of it blew me away and opened my mind to the possibilities of what beer could be. I eventually became a regular at the Bottle Room, where I eventually met John, more variations of beer, and my passion for craft beer flourished from there.

**BEER PAPER: What was your biggest inspiration in starting WBC?**

Ed: John and I developed a friendship being regulars at The Bottle Room where we both got inspired to home brew and developed a passion for it. As we went from a one-gallon system to five, and through multiple trials and errors, we developed a skill for the trade that we felt comfortable with. We were later approached with a business opportunity to brew on a professional level and felt inspired to be the first ones to bring locally-made craft beer to Whittier. That really meant something to me and it was inspiring to other people. The craft beer community was going strong. Why not be the first ones in our community to brew craft beer and bring it to the community? That's what encouraged me to take the leap to leave my IT corporate job and jump head first into this business venture.

**BEER PAPER: Once the pandemic hit, just three months into opening, what was your guiding light in keeping a seemingly burgeoning business alive that all of a sudden came a screeching halt?**

Ed: Honestly, it was a scary time and we weren't sure we going to make it

at first but we committed to rise to the occasion. We chose to take the steps needed to bring our beer to the people. In the craft beer community, we discussed what possibilities we could explore to figure out what we could do in order to stay afloat or else we were all going to close. We came up with a secondary business plan and we decided to go online, do curbside, and even delivery. It was our community that saved us.

**BEER PAPER: Did you ever see yourself as an entrepreneur or professional brewer?**

John: Not at all, this was an opportunity that kind of just fell into our lap. Ed and I both were in the same place as home brewers becoming more and more skilled. At the time, we had no idea that we would be in this building. We figured we'd be in a warehouse near uptown just doing our thing. We got even more inspired once we got here at Nixon Plaza that, the opportunities seemed endless. We now have exciting plans for the future that include a biergarten and other community driven events that bring our overarching dream home.

**BEER PAPER: What kind of advice would you give to an aspiring brewer?**

John: I would recommend to start home brewing and then take an accredited course at a university, online. It's was the process of failing and learning from those mistakes. The pandemic in a sense was the advantage we got to bring in other professionals in the industry and learn from their skills.

Ed: I see a lot of new ambitious and excited brewers trying to do all these



Ed Hernandez and John Kennedy

new and different style beers when I truly believe it starts with the basics. Learn how to brew well with your four basic ingredients and do it well. Once you have that down, then start to explore into more creative outlets but it starts with the basics.

**BEER PAPER: What is your brewing philosophy?**

John: Drink independent craft beer, drink local.

ED: In all honesty, I'm not trying to copy Eagle Rock, but it's truly about, beer for the people.

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## OC BEAT

## WINDSOR BROWN'S: COMFORTABLE AND APPROACHABLE

by David Mulvihill



Windsor Brown's founders Scott Windsor and Greg Brown

Photo Credit: David Mulvihill

Craft beer devotees Scott Windsor and Greg Brown recently opened Windsor Brown's on Center Street Promenade in Anaheim. Together, their goal is to provide quality sandwiches and a finely tailored rotating selection of remarkable craft beers from near and far, and select wines from a number of small producers.

**Windsor and Brown**

Scott Windsor may be best known to the community as owner of Windsor

Homebrew Supply Co and Bottle Shop for the past 7.5 years. At both sites, Anaheim and Costa Mesa, you can now enjoy 16 flowing taps dispensing a rotating variety of craft beer. Before OC, Scott also operated homebrew shops while living in the Midwest (Norman, OK).

Gregory Brown comes to Windsor Brown's most recently from Beachwood Brewing & BBQ, where he spent about 8 years wearing a

few different hats, including Chief Operating Officer and Director of Hospitality. He was formerly GM at The Monk's Kettle in San Francisco prior to relocating to Southern California.

The two first met at Beachwood, Seal Beach, while Greg was working there; a destination Scott frequented as one of his favorite beer destinations. Similar interests in beer and breweries seasoned their friendship. After Beachwood's Seal Beach location closed they began considering possibilities for opening a food and craft beer establishment of their own. Scott focused on the idea of sandwiches as the primary food component. Since it aligned with his own visualization of "keeping it simple and having fun with it," Greg took to the idea. Brown stated that sandwiches have the makeup to be able to do that. "You can be as simple as you want with them, or you can elevate them and do fun things." Their menu definitely reflects this.

**The Setting**

Their search of almost a year for a location finally brought them to the Center Street Promenade location that was ultimately built-out to become home to Windsor Brown's. Comfortable and approachable are words that come to mind upon entering Windsor Brown's for the first time. A welcoming informal setting provides choices for where to enjoy your food and drink, at the bar or one of the tables inside, or amongst the trees in the ample outdoor patio space.

**The Fare**

The delectable sandwich menu presents a wide range of options and choices to accommodate many palates. Look for specials as well. From the Basics and Cold Cuts, to the Panini Press and vegetarian slices of the menu, all sandwiches appear to be elevated via choice and use of ingredients. Sandwich dressings and accoutrements are far from second thoughts in completing each sandwich. They become an integral part of the whole, as evidenced by the melt-in-your mouth heirloom tomatoes that accompany many of the sandwiches.

And, while the House Plants section offers vegetarian options, such as roasted portabella, seared eggplant and hummus, meat can also be added.

Brown shared that they are sourcing all of the best ingredients they can, "There's nothing to hide behind in a sandwich, so we are taking care of all the ingredients as respectfully as possible."

**The Beer**

For the 16 rotating beers on tap, you'll likely see offerings from breweries that you don't often see. The relationships these industry veterans have forged over the years are reflective in the coveted beers they are able to procure and serve.

On the day of *Beer Paper's* first visit, in addition to a few local brews, there were beers from San Luis Obispo, San Diego, Iowa, Massachusetts, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, Belgium and Germany, and styles that included Kölsch, Schwarzbier, Hefeweizen, Stout, IPA, Saison, and Sour.



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Windsor Brown's tap list

Photo Credit: Daniel Drennon

Regarding the tap list, Scott shared, "It's not our goal to just have super rare stuff, just things we really like and enjoy." From classic representations to the latest and greatest, the team is focused on balancing its taps to present the spectrum of styles.

On occasion, the team will devote a day to feature a specific brewery they are excited about. In November, both Side Project (St Louis, MO) and Highland Park Brewery (Los Angeles) were highlighted on two separate Thursdays. HPB founder Bob Kunz and many of his HPB team showed up for the Highland Park event, even collaborating on a sandwich and playlist of music for the occasion.

Greg added that everything he and Scott have done to-date is very representative of who they are and what they appreciate. We think patrons will enjoy and appreciate Windsor Brown's as well.

*David Mulvihill continues his thirst to experience and promote the best of craft beer. He also provides business-side support (reporting, excise tax, compliance & personnel) to local breweries and brewers guilds. david@socalcraftbeer.com.*



Windsor Brown's patio

Photo Credit: David Mulvihill

## COVER STORY

# VICTOR THE INNOVATOR

## THE RISE OF THE LAGERMEISTER

by Tomm Carroll



Victor Novak

All Photos Courtesy of Figueroa Mountain Brew Co

If Victor Novak, one of Southern California's most acclaimed and enduring lager brewers, were to have a Doppelbock named in his honor, it would have to be called "Innovator." And not just because it conforms to the -ator suffix of all beer monikers for that German-style, dark, sweet and strong lager since the turn of the 20th century, but because it actually describes what kind of brewer he is. So it should come as no surprise to anyone who is paying attention that in early November he was named Director of Innovation for Figueroa Mountain Brewing's three new Los Angeles brewpubs.

Those small breweries/restaurants, just acquired in June through a partnership with Artisanal Brewers Collective (ABC), founded by LA craft beer entrepreneur Tony Yanow, are (and will soon be) Sherman Oaks' Bluebird Brasserie (to become the German bier-focused Lagerhaus), West LA's Stalking Horse (the forthcoming Mexican cerveza-oriented Agua Santa Cervecería) and Westwood Village's Broxton (Fig Mtn University).

"This is kind of like coming full circle for me," Novak told *Beer Paper* in a recent interview conducted at the still-to-transition Stalking Horse. "I started on an eight-barrel system at Dock Street back in the '90s, and now I'm effectively coming back to seven-barrel brewing, managing small systems like these brewpubs. This is what I got into brewing for, and what I still love doing. I'm happy for the opportunity to have these three pubs and to expand from there."

For those unfamiliar with Novak's brewing history, following is a summary of his beer backstory, which began 30 years ago this month, when he received a home brewing kit as a Christmas gift in 1992, and became an avid homebrewer. In the midst of reading Michael Jackson's *World Guide to Beer*, he had his brewer's epiphany: "I'm like, 'Oh my God, this is culture. It's history. It's tradition. It's food...'" I still remember to this day, I was literally sitting on the couch and said, "THIS is what I want to do!"

Living in Philadelphia at the time, he got a job as a server and bartender at Dock Street Brewery and restaurant. A California boy who was born in Camarillo and attended UC Berkeley while living in San Francisco, Novak knew the hoppy beers of Anchor and Sierra Nevada, and the beers of the Pacific Northwest, but was surprised to find some of the styles being brewed at Dock Street, like Kölsch, Altbier, Oscura, Sahti... "I loved the idea that I didn't know what 90% of the styles were," he confessed. "Plus there were these killer lagers; Will Kemper [currently owner of Chuckanut Brewing] was the original brewmaster. I realized pretty quickly that Philly was far ahead of the Bay Area in terms of brewing to style, with its proximity to Europe."

In October 1995, Dock Street gave Novak his first brewing in job, hiring him as a junior brewer. He worked there for 18 months or so and then returned to California, where he worked for a short-lived brewery restaurant in Simi Valley called Doc's Brewpub — owned by two doctors (get it?) — in 1997. It was at the end of that year he met Joe Manzanella, who was planning to open TAPS Fish House & Brewery in Brea in a few months, and wanted Novak as his brewer. "Of course, a year and a half later, I came on in July of '99. And then we opened September '99" he said.

Novak really became known, and gained renown as Southern California's *lagermeister*, during his 15-year TAPS tenure, winning 16 GABF medals for world-class European-style lagers from both the brewery's Brea and Corona locations. He also mentored many a soon-to-be-successful Southland brewer during that period, including Evan Price (Green Cheek) and Steven Torres (Upshift), to name just two.

In mid-2014, the aforementioned Yanow and Meg Gill of LA's rapidly growing, but only a few years old (and still independent) Golden Road Brewing reached out to Novak about joining them. But not feeling he had anything to contribute, as he knew

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nothing about large-scale brewing — having never worked on anything larger than a 15-barrel system — he initially turned down the offer. “But then, as I got to my 15th year at TAPS, I felt I’d reached my limit of what I could actually achieve there, and needed a challenge,” he recalled. “And I still remember that was around the time Jon Stewart left *The Daily Show* and said, ‘It’s time to be uncomfortable again.’ I agreed with that and embraced it. I figured I could continue doing this for another 30 years at the same spot, or... So I reached back out to Tony.”

He joined Golden Road in September 2014, and soon became Brewmaster and Director of Innovation at its Anaheim facility, from which he won even more brewing awards and accolades. The Orange County outpost was purchased in May 2015. And then five months later came the news that shocked and surprised most in the Los Angeles and Orange County brewing communities (Novak included): Golden Road Brewing was acquired by AB InBev, the world’s largest brewery. “I was judging at GABF when it was announced,” he said. “It was kind of crazy.”

Of course a massive backlash from the Southern California craft beer fans and brewers, immediately ensued over this “Empire Strikes Back” salvo launched by the Death Star of Big Beer, with anger and resentment directed at all things Golden Road, which was considered a traitor. Just over a year into his new gig, the Director of Innovation was not spared the outrage and had to suffer those slings and arrows as well. “A lot of people said to me, ‘We respect you, but we don’t appreciate this happening in LA,’” Novak acknowledged.

“But, leaving the politics of this for another conversation,” he continued, “I can say the opportunities to go to the mothership in St. Louis — beyond the wrought iron gates of basically Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory there — to work with and learn from those experts in yeast and malt and hops... I never thought that would happen! AB was very respectful and effectively kept its word in terms of leaving us alone, letting us grow, helping with distribution. That was all, in many respects, very positive. I wouldn’t trade it for anything because, without those learning experiences I wouldn’t be where I’m at now.”

**A New Beginning**

And where Victor Novak is at right now is a week into his new job in



*Victor Novak and Brian Waters*

mid-November, giving this interview inside the Cornish-style English pub, soon to be redesigned into the cantina for a cervecería — one of the three brewing facilities at which he will be brewing and innovating with Brian Waters, the head brewer for these pubs, and new assistant brewer Alex Jordan. And of course, working with Figueroa Mountain’s multi-award-winning Brewmaster, Kevin Ashford. Since we’re back to the present day, let’s switch to the Q&A format.

***Beer Paper: Victor, what brought your to leave Golden Road this past August, after eight years there?***

VICTOR NOVAK: I kind of got to that same point that that I had gotten to at TAPS. I loved what I was doing in Anaheim, which was all the innovation, but I wanted to simplify getting pulled in too many directions, My passion, where I like to be and live, is small-scale brewing.

If there’s one thing really positive that came out of Covid, it’s that it helped people to understand what their priorities are. And that’s kind of where I was in August. I think I left Golden Road in a better place than it was when

(COVER STORY continued on page 12)

**EL SEGUNDO'S AUTOMOTIVE INSPIRED CRAFT BREWERY**

**UPSHIFT**  
BREWING COMPANY

 A photograph of the Upshift Brewing Company outdoor patio. The scene is set under a bright blue sky with scattered clouds. In the foreground, several people are seated at wooden picnic tables, some under large red patio umbrellas. A tall, silver patio heater is visible on the right. In the background, the building features a sign that reads 'UPSHIFT BREWING COMPANY' and an American flag flying on a pole.

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Victor Novak

All Photos Courtesy of Figueroa Mountain Brew Co

(COVER STORY continued)

I first got there. And it was time for a new adventure.

**BP: When did Figueroa Mountain contact you about the position?**

VN: After I put out a Facebook post about my leaving Golden Road, they contacted me saying, “Hey, we think you would be the perfect fit.” We had the initial interview within a week of me leaving and I told them I’m gonna take some time off to clear my head, reset and reprioritize. My wife and I took some time to travel, so things really didn’t come together until October. And that’s when we ironed out the details, about things like helping Figueroa Mountain increase its foothold in LA, and collaborating with Kevin and the team to come up with some innovative, cool things that might eventually be scaled up — but even if not, we’d have some killer beers for the LA community!

**BP: Was there a moment when you really knew this was the next chapter in your brewing career?**

VN: The key really was meeting Kevin and Brian over at Broxton, hearing their vision and having had conversations with [CEO and co-founder] Jamie [Dietenhofer], about what they all foresaw the three pubs being, each with its own identity but still having the ability to play in those different spaces.

**BP: How do you get along with Kevin Ashford?**

VN: Kevin and I just hit it off immediately. He has been so welcoming and we really see eye-to-eye on how we view beer and brewing in general. Say you enter 10 beers in a competition, and you win two medals. That’s great, but what happened to the other eight? How do we make those better? *That’s* the mentality I’ve always had, and Kevin said that immediately — how we both view beer as constant improvement.

In addition, he’s one of the best brewers on the planet — especially among lager brewers — and that’s where the fit really was important because I needed to make sure that Kevin wanted me here. Basically because sometimes you come into a place where you’ve got an established brewmaster and that doesn’t always fit. I have absolute respect for him and Figueroa Mountain, and I’m happy to be a part of it and to contribute where I can.

**BP: Have you worked yet with Brian Waters?**

VN: Brian, the head brewer, has been here four years and has done a great job with the three locations. Our relationship just in the week we’ve worked together has been fantastic, because I can tell he’s got the passion. He’s got the drive, he’s reading. He’s listening to podcasts. He’s looking at new hops.

The Cold IPA we just brewed — I know that’s a sore spot for you, Tomm — was Brian’s idea. I said, “Let’s do it.” And let’s talk about the water profile, or what kind of adjuncts we’re going to use to lighten the body, and, of course the hop profile. It’s a style I’ve never brewed, so I did a little research on it. Brian had already done it. I listened to a podcast and read on it as well. We’ll see how it turns out.

**BP: Well, that’s a currently trendy style that’s not really gonna fit in the purview of the Lagerhaus — although, technically, it is a lager. You’ll be brewing classic German and Czech styles, obviously, for that pub, but what about improvisations on some of those styles, or ales even?**

VN: That has yet to be fleshed out. The goal right now are the classics, right? Let’s just have a beautiful Schwarzbier, Helles, German Pils, Bohemian Pilsner, Rauchbier, Czech Dark Lager, Doppelbock and all those classic styles readily available.

That said, there have been breweries that have tried to say, “Look, we make German beer. That’s it.” And there are not really many of them around as much as there were 10-20 years ago, because if you’re going to be in California, you have to make an IPA, a Double IPA, a Hazy, a Sour; you can’t say, “We’re only going to make a Kölsch an Altbier, a Märzen and a Maibock — and that’s it. If you don’t like it, there’s the door.” Well, people are gonna choose the door. You have to adapt because you need to sell beer to stay open.

**Embracing the Oscura Side**

**BP: Similarly, what are the kinds of beers you’ll brew for the Cervceria, other than a light Mexican Lager, maybe with and without lime, and an amber Vienna Lager style made with flaked maize?**

VN: That’s kind of what I foresee on the agenda right now — a beautiful light Mexican Lager and an Amber, but also the darker Oscura, which is kind of like Negra Modelo,



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**BP:** *Oscura? That's like a Mexican Vienna Lager style only made with darker malt, similar to Victoria or Noche Buena, isn't it?*

VN: Yeah, in George and Laurie Fix's book, *Oktoberfest, Vienna and Märzen*, Oscura was called the Santiago Graf version of the Vienna Lager [after the Swiss-born brewer who created it in the 1860s] in the northern Mexican/southern US region, made with darker malt.

And what blows me away is that in my early days of brewing at Dock Street, they made an Oscura, so I've been brewing that style for 25 years now! The cool thing is that being half-Mexican and being from Southern California, and fully respecting and loving the Latino culture here — especially Mexican — I've been able to brew this beer and get some to my mother, who loves Oscura. And whenever we would put it on, whether at Dock Street, or TAPS or Golden Road, Spanish speakers would appreciate it. We were respecting that culture, not targeting a Mexican audience. This is literally a classic, traditional style resurrected, and you don't see a lot of it. I think it's awesome.

**BP:** *I don't think I've ever seen a craft version of Oscura.*

VN: To be honest, that's where those folks who passed on Golden Road because of philosophical reasons, or whatever, missed out — because we had one on every year around Cinco de Mayo, and at TAPS then too. Oscura

is great because it's not brewed very often and it's a nice change of pace from the light Mexican Lager. And it's toasty — not roasty — which makes it so food-friendly, just a beautiful compliment to carnitas and carne asada.

**BP:** *But aside from a Michelada, which is a light lager served with additives — not all that dissimilar in concept to a Berliner Weisse served with syrups — what innovations might we see at the Cerveceria? Maybe modern Mexican craft beer styles like a Horchata Porter or Chile Pepper Chocolate Stout, or perhaps beers utilizing indigenous ingredients and traditional flavors?*

VN: Again, these are those details that have yet to be figured out, and that's a larger discussion above my pay grade right now. But this is the ongoing conversation at Figueroa Mountain in terms of how that's going to evolve and what these pubs are ultimately going to be.

**BP:** *And I for one would like to be sitting at one of these pubs a year from now, sharing one of Victor Novak's beers — be it a Neo-Mexicanus Cerveza Pálida Fría or an Innovator Doppelbock — with him while we continue this still-ongoing conversation on the evolution of craft beer, breweries and pubs.*

*Tomm Carroll is a beer writer / judge / educator / historian / collector / traveler / drinker (not always in that order). He can be reached at [beerscribe@earthlink.net](mailto:beerscribe@earthlink.net).*



Victor Novak and Brian Waters



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## INLAND EMPIRE

# ALL KILLER. NO FILLER.

by Daniel Drennon



Aubree and Greg Webb with Maddie

All Photos Courtesy of Ironfire Brewing

I remember the exact moment I “discovered” Ironfire Brewing. It was 2012 and I was the LA Weekly beer writer. One of my go to spots was 38 Degrees in Alhambra. Co-owner Clay Harding had cultivated a world class tap list that was as good as any in the greater Los Angeles area. Of course, way back then, a mere nine years ago, that entire list of “destination beer bars” was lamentably short.

The best tap lists in those distant days were dominated by NorCal and San Diego breweries, both of which were light years ahead of LA which only had Craftsman, Eagle Rock, Ladyface and Strand. Hard to believe given that less than ten years later we are pushing 100 breweries in LA and another 100 in OC and the IE.

But back to my discovery. I spotted Ironfire 51/50 West Coast IPA on Clay’s sublime tap list and asked him about it. Harding responded, “It’s a couple of ex-Ballast Point brewers who opened their own spot in Temecula. I drove down there to pick up the kegs myself.” Given that my favorite beer at that moment in time was Sculpin, I excitedly ordered my first 51/50 and it did not disappoint.

This is my interview with co-owner, brewer and general all-around bad ass human being, Greg Webb.

**DRENNON: Where were you born and raised? How did your upbringing lead to the person you are today?**

WEBB: I was born in Morristown NJ and was raised in the neighboring town of Madison until 7th grade, at the end of that school year my father’s job took our family to Bermuda for the three years. After spending one year in school in Bermuda my parents felt that it was best that I started high school in the states so that I ultimately wouldn’t fall behind due to being out of the country and studying an entirely different curriculum. That then led me to a co-ed boarding school in the White Mountains region of New Hampshire. After spending two years in NH, I ultimately moved back to NJ with my family to finish high school before heading off to Maryland for college.

As far as my upbringing leading me to who I am today I became comfortable facing adversity at a young age. Between moving to a foreign country, being away from friends and family, essentially leaving my comfort zone behind and learning how to somewhat live on my own at a young age, I have developed a certain level of resilience when it comes to working through any situation no matter how easy or difficult.

**DRENNON: Which beer did you have that gave you that “wow moment” and make you want to become a brewer?**

WEBB: For me it wasn’t any particular beer, it was rather multiple beers and a series of somewhat random events that brought me to where I am today. After finishing college in 2005 at Towson University in Maryland, I found myself living in San Diego’s Pacific Beach neighborhood and working at a local fish market and restaurant. We didn’t have a huge a beer line up but I vividly remember Ballast Point’s Yellowtail and Karl Strauss’s Red Trolley being on tap. Quickly recognizing they were brewed locally I found myself ordering whatever beer I could find from those two breweries when I was out and about. And on top of that my neighbors in PB were from Chico so they religiously drank Sierra Nevada Pale Ale which I also quickly acquired a taste for and that is where my love for hops began. And for those of you who were around the San Diego beer scene back around that time I was a quick bike ride away from The Liars Club so that was essentially where I went to go to try different styles and different beers as my interest in craft beer continued to grow.

After working at the fish market and restaurant for about six months or so, I decided to leave and took a bartending position at new restaurant concept in the UTC Mall in La Jolla.

The interesting thing about this job was that the restaurant was Cuban/Asian fusion and focused heavily on the cocktails of South Florida such as Mojitos, Rum Runners, and Mai Tais. However, this restaurant had a brewery in it and because of the way the owners purchased the restaurant they had transferred the Type 23 license with liquor privileges over to themselves rather than apply for a completely new license so that meant they had to brew and sell beer on site. The solution to that was to sublease that small brewhouse to a small start up brewery. This gave the startup brewery a place to brew and start distributing beer from and allowed the restaurant to stay in compliance with their ABC license by offering a couple of “house beers.”

The brewer at that time was Ray Astamendi and as we developed a friendship, I started picking his brain about beer, the brewing process and everything in between. This eventually led to me even showing up on my days off to just see what he had going on in the brewery. Soon after that I found an ad on Craigslist for a keg washer at Ballast Point’s Scripps Ranch location. I got the job and never looked back. My days at Ballast Point started as a keg washer and ended as a brewer while learning a plethora of things in-between.

In conclusion there wasn’t one beer, or one wow moment that made me wanna be brewer. It was rather a curiosity



Ironfire beers



Co-Owner John Maino

that I couldn't pull myself away from once it was presented to me and I just keep following to see where it's ultimately going to take me.

**DRENNON:** *How long were you with Ballast Point, who were your mentors there and what did you learn that led you to want to open your own place?*

WEBB: I was with Ballast Point for four or five years. During the time that I was working at Scripps Ranch and we had such an awesome crew (and the Homebrew Mart crew was just as awesome – UNITY) it's hard to say exactly who my mentors were as everyone working there at that time played such a pivotal role in the company's success and in some way has had an influence on where Ironfire is today. That being said I still owe a huge shoutout to Yuseff Cherney, Ryan Glenn, James Murray, Jeff Brancato, Colby Chandler and, of course, the infamous Earl Kight. In one way or another each of these guys had a major influence on my journey through the beer industry and there are many things both John and I learned from these guys that we find ourselves using daily. I think what really pushed us to wanting to open our own place was that we were ready to move on from shift brewing and really wanted to get the creative juices flowing.

**DRENNON:** *When did you and John decide you should open your own brewery and how and why did you choose the name Ironfire?*

WEBB: John had very quietly been brewing up the idea of Ironfire for quite sometime before approaching me with the idea and business plan. The name Ironfire came through many failed attempts at finding a proper name for our western outlaw/zombie theme we knew we were going for with our artwork especially in the early days. Ultimately the name Ironfire came from us being asked how long we'd had the iron in the fire, in regards to starting the brewery.

**DRENNON:** *Why did you choose Temecula and how have you seen the beer scene there evolve considering that most folks consider it to be wine country?*

WEBB: We initially chose Temecula because we had already seen how fast the city had been growing. John grew up in Fallbrook, just south of Temecula and he can still tell you stories about when there was only one traffic light in the town. And looking ahead 9-10 years from when we were scouting locations and just starting out, I never would have guessed this city would have grown as fast as it did. Although Temecula initially made it on the

map because of wine, if you look at the food, beer, distilled spirits and meaderies that have hit the scene in the Temecula Valley over the past decade you will quickly see that Temecula has become a destination for many things far beyond just wine. Even Pechanga is now built up to a level that it can compete with any of the casinos on the Las Vegas strip when it comes to ambiance and amenities. When we started Ironfire you could count the breweries in this region on one hand and now we have over a dozen breweries in just the Temecula Valley. And at the end of the day, how in how many towns can you go to where you can visit a winery, brewery, distillery and meadery all in one day?

**DRENNON:** *Who and or what have been your major influences as both the brewery and as a brewer?*

WEBB: My major influences come from all walks of life. The people that tend to have the biggest influence on me are the ones who don't give up no matter the situation. You never know what tomorrow is going bring you so might as well work your ass off today because that could make all the difference tomorrow.

**DRENNON:** *Do you have a flagship beer and/or a beer you are most proud of?*

WEBB: My go-to flagship beer would be our Stetsons & Sombreros Mexican Lager. It's clean, crisp and 4.7% abv. It's the perfect beer for a break in the middle of the day and low enough in alcohol that I don't lose my motivation for the rest of the day. As much as I love hops and our IPA's I've found myself seeking out the lower abv beers over the past few years. The beer I am most proud of would have to be our Last Rites – Bourbon Barrel Aged Triple Chocolate Stout. This beer is an extremely drinkable 16% abv and has been a cult favorite since its inaugural release in 2015.

**DRENNON:** *Is there an Ironfire philosophy, whether it be the styles you brew or the way you conduct business?*

WEBB: ALL KILLER NO FILLER – basically don't half ass it. If you're not going to give 100%, then what's point? Although we don't have the fanciest equipment in the world, given the resources we do have, we always give 100%.

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692 Arrow Grand Cir, Covina

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4019 Atlantic Ave, Long Beach

Angel City Brewery  
216 S. Alameda St, Los Angeles

Angry Horse Brewing  
603 W. Whittier Blvd, Montebello

Arrow Lodge Brewing  
720 E. Arrow Hwy, Unit C, Covina

Arts District Brewing Co  
828 Traction Ave, Los Angeles

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247 Long Beach Blvd, Long Beach

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Border X Brewing  
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24516 Narbonne Ave, Lomita

Buzzrock Brewing/George Lopez  
Brewing/Brews Hall  
21770 Del Amo Circle East, Torrance

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16745 Schoenborn St, Los Angeles

Cerveceria del Pueblo  
141 W Bellevue Dr #100, Pasadena

Claremont Craft Ales  
1420 N Claremont Blvd #204C,  
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Common Corners Brewing  
20265 Valley Blvd, Unit M, Walnut

Common Space Brewery  
3411 W El Segundo Blvd, Hawthorne

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117 E 162nd St, Carson

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4471 W Rosecrans Ave, Lawndale

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Firestone Walker  
The Propagator  
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1580 W San Bernardino Ave, Ste H,  
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3768 Long Beach Blvd, Long Beach  
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1700 Sunset Blvd, Los Angeles

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Los Molinos Beer  
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Lost Winds Brewing Co.  
924 Calle Negocio Suite C,  
San Clemente

Monkish Brewing Company  
336 S Anaheim Blvd, Anaheim

Network Brewery  
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1621 S Sinclair St #B, Anaheim

**Phantom Ales**  
1211 Las Brisas St, Anaheim

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**Raymond Avenue Brewing Company**  
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Huntington Beach

**Salty Bear Brewing**  
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**GreyWolf Brewing Co**  
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**Hamilton Family Brewery**  
9757 Seventh St #802,  
Rancho Cucamonga

**Hangar 24 Craft Brewery**  
1710 Sessums Dr, Redlands

**Hops & Spokes Brewing Company**  
34324 Yucaipa Blvd, Suite A, Yucaipa

**I & I Brewing**  
5135 Edison Ave #1, Chino

**Inland Wharf Brewing**  
26440 Jefferson Ave, Suite A, Murrieta

**Ironfire Brewing Company**  
42095 Zevo Dr #1, Temecula

**Joshua Tree Brewery**  
6393 Sunset Rd, Joshua Tree

**Kings Brewing Company**  
8560 Vineyard Ave #301,  
Rancho Cucamonga

**La Quinta Brewing Company**  
74-714 Technology Dr, Palm Desert

**Lake Arrowhead Brewing**  
329 Villa, Lake Arrowhead

**Last Name Brewing**  
2120 Porterfield Way, Upland

**Luchador Brewing**  
15941 Pomona Rincon Rd #100,  
Chino Hills

**Mason Jar Brewing**  
29683 New Hub Dr, Suite A, Menifee

**No Clue Craft Brewing**  
9037 #170 Arrow Rt,  
Rancho Cucamonga

**Oak Hills Brewing Company**  
12221 Poplar St. Unit 3, Oak Hills

**Off The Grid Brewing**  
13615 John Glenn Road, Apple Valley

**Oscar's Brewing Company**  
29375 Rancho California Rd, Temecula

**Our Brew**  
2351 W Lugonia Ste B, Redlands

**Packinghouse Brewing Co**  
6421 Central Ave #101-A, Riverside

**Refuge Brewery**  
43040 Rancho Way, Temecula

**Relentless Brewing Co**  
42030 Avenida Alvarado, Temecula

**Rescue Brewing Company**  
167 N 2nd Ave, Upland

**Ritual Brewing Company**  
1315 Research Dr, Redlands

**Route 30 Brewing Company**  
9860 Indiana Ave Ste 19, Riverside  
3720 Mission Inn Ave, Riverside

**Rök House Brewing Company**  
1939 W 11th St #A, Upland

**Rowdy's Brew Co**  
10002 6th St A, Rancho Cucamonga

**Sandbox Brewing Co**  
4650 Arrow Hwy, Ste A9, Montclair

**Skyland Ale Works**  
1869 Pomona Rd Unit E/F, Corona

**Solaris Beer & Blending**  
41601B Cherry St, Murrieta

**Solorio Brewing Company**  
9395 Feron Blvd Suite K,  
Rancho Cucamonga

**Sour Cellars Brewery**  
9495 E 9th St Unit B,  
Rancho Cucamonga

**Stadium Pizza Main Street**  
169 N Main Street, Lake Elsinore

**Stone Church Brewing**  
2785 Cabot Dr Suite 160, Corona

**Storytellers Brewery and Meet House**  
109 N Maple St Unit C, Corona

**The Stout House**  
1294 W 9th St, Upland

**Strum Brewing**  
235 S Campus Ave, Ontario

**Temecula Brewing Company**  
32125 Temecula Pkwy, Suite C, Temecula

**Three Marm Brewing**  
23555 Knapps Cutoff, Crestline

**Transmission Brewing**  
1098 E Front St, Ventura

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8939 Vernon Ave, Suite C, Montclair

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71800 Highway 111, Rancho Mirage

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48027 Stone Rd, Big Bear Lake

**Big Bear Mountain Brewery**  
40260 Big Bear Blvd, Big Bear Lake

**Heroes Restaurant & Brewery**  
3397 Mission Inn Ave, Riverside

**Idyllwild Brewpub**  
54423 Village Center Dr, Idyllwild

**Las Palmas Brewing**  
461 N Palm Canyon Dr, Palm Springs

**LouEddie's Pizza & Brewery**  
28561 CA-18, Skyforest

**Main Street Brewery**  
493 N Main Street, Corona

**Thompson Brewing**  
9900 Indiana Ave Suite 7, Riverside

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