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# All Hail the Alpha King

by Daniel Drennon

Trevor Walls is the co-founder and Chief Brewing Officer at Brewery X in Anaheim. Walls is a role model for how to evolve from home brewer to world

class pro brewer. There are no short cuts nor substitutes for hard work, paying your dues, getting education, perfecting your craft, and climbing the proverbial ladder

for 13 years until you find yourself on the top rung. He began his career in beer at Ballast Point's Home Brew Mart in 2010, became a cellarman at BP, then moved up to The Bruery

as a cellarman, and then brewer. Walls attended the prestigious brewing schools, Siebel in Chicago and Doemens in Munich, graduating in 2012. He returned to brew

at Pizza Port Bressi Ranch and then as Head Brewer at Pizza Port San Clemente where he scored a GABF Silver Medal for Coffee Beer.

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Photo Credit: Dennis Benson

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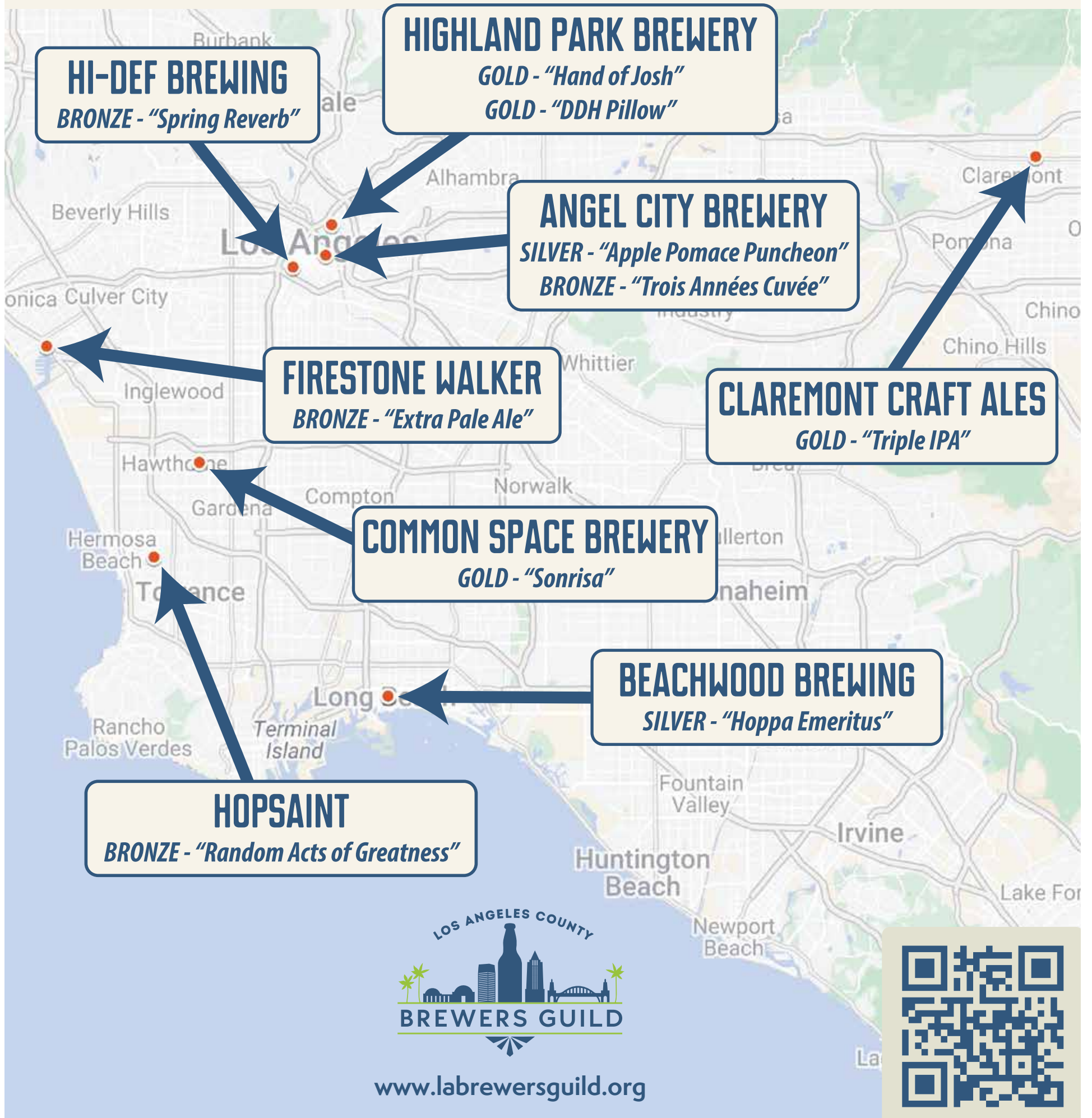
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# LA County Breweries win 10 medals at the Great American Beer Festival!



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## GABF AWARDS 2023

# CALIFORNIA DOMINATES IN DENVER...AGAIN.

by Russell Hainline

While Southern California historically has been famous for its tans, it's now, in the beer world, known as the home of the Pales.

California once again cleaned up at Great American Beer Fest last weekend, taking home 73 medals as a state and winning two Brewery of the Year awards, including San Luis Obispo's **Liquid Gravity Brewing**. The stretch of California this intrepid publication covers, from San Luis Obispo County down to Orange County, won 36 medals. To put this achievement in perspective, Colorado won the second most medals out of any state in the country with 40.

Among California's achievements at this festival, perhaps its most impressive is its absolute dominance in Pale Ale, India Pale Ale, Strong Pale Ale, and India Pale Lager categories. There are 42 available medals in the 14 categories which feature the word "pale"—and California won 21 of them, including 8 of the 14 gold medals. In the Imperial IPA categories, California was unstoppable, winning 5 of the 6 available medals—including two gold medal wins here in Los Angeles County for **Claremont Craft Ales** (gold in the Imperial IPA category for Triple IPA) and **Highland Park Brewery** (gold in the Juicy or Hazy Imperial IPA category for DDH Pillow).

The biggest winner in our neck of the woods was the aforementioned Liquid Gravity Brewing, which certainly helped California's pale ale dominance by delivering a bronze in American-Style Strong Pale Ale for Liquid Gravity IPA and a silver in Imperial IPA for Drama King. It also brought home gold in German Dark Lager category for Goodnight Munich, helping seal the deal for a victory in the 2,001-5,000 Barrels Brewery and Brewer of the Year category.

This acclaim won't be a mystery to anyone who's ever visited Liquid Gravity or read the *BEER PAPER* September 2020 cover story about them (if you missed it, you can read it under "back issues" on our website). Gough's brilliant IPAs have been known as some of the best in the state even before this trophy was awarded. Gough racked up a bunch of medals for his hoppy pales and IPAs as head brewer at Central Coast Brewing before opening Liquid Gravity.

I had the pleasure of getting to chat with an elated Brendan Gough, owner and head brewer at Liquid Gravity, mere minutes after their victory. He began with the understatement of the year: "It's a good day at the office."

I asked him about California's dominance in the pale ale and IPA categories, and Gough recounted a conversation with a fellow brewer he'd had that morning.



Liquid Gravity

All Photos Courtesy of Brewers Association



Claremont Craft Ales



Highland Park Brewery

"I was talking to a guy right before we came in about which categories we both entered. And we enter a lot of west coast hoppy stuff... because to me, these are the medals that matter, it's what I think we do best. And he goes, "Oh yeah, we don't even enter those. You guys out in California, we can't even compete with that."

"You look in California," Gough continued, "and there's 50 breweries that any of them could've had a spot in those medals. And any time you have an opportunity to get on stage and get a medal, that's a pretty special moment."

Other regional breweries that medaled:

Fewer than ten craft breweries of the over 2000 that entered won three or more medals—one of which was San Juan Capistrano's **Docent Brewing**. After bringing home two golds in 2020 and another in 2022, Docent doubled their current medal haul with three more wins: a bronze for Trabuco in the American-Style Brown Ale category, a bronze for Double Nickels in the American-Style Pale Ale category, and its third medal in four years in the Coffee Stout and Porter category for its scrumptious coffee stout, Super Tonic.

Highland Park Brewery continued to establish itself as one of the best makers of beer on the planet with two gold medals—the aforementioned gold in the Juicy or Hazy Imperial IPA category and a gold in International-Style Pale Ale for one of their many exceptional west coast pilsners, Hand of Josh.

**Figueroa Mountain Brewing** won silver in the Herb and Spice Beer category for their Hibiscus Lime Shandy—which marks their thirteenth year in a row winning a medal, an absolutely mind-boggling achievement at a festival with Great American Beer Fest's size and scale.

Similarly, **Beachwood Brewing** and Beachwood Blendery have combined for wins in twelve consecutive festivals, winning a silver in American Black Ale or American Stout for Hoppa Emeritus and a bronze in Scottish-Style Ale for Glenlongbeach.

After winning gold last year in the Kellerbier or Zwickelbier category, MadeWest Brewing joined California's party of pales and snagged a gold in the India Pale Lager or Cold India Pale Ale category for Sound Sail.

Right on the tails of its own Brewery of the Year award last year, Atascadero's **Wild Fields Brewhouse** won its fifth gold medal in three years, this time in

(GABF AWARDS 2023  
continued on page 6)

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Firestone Walker

All Photos Courtesy of Brewers Association

(GABF AWARDS 2023 continued)

the Oatmeal Stout category for Mountain Moonlight.

Four breweries took home their first GABF gold this year. Torrance's Common Space in the American-Style Lager category for Sonrisa, Corona's Evans Brewing in Belgian-Style Strong Specialty Ale for Quadrupel Donker, Camarillo's Institution Ale Co. in American-Style Brown Ale for Restraint, and San Clemente's Lost Winds Brewing in Fruited American Sour for Huckleberry pHin Sour.

Angel City Brewery marks Los Angeles County's third craft brewery to take home multiple medals: silver in the Experimental Beer category for its lambic-

inspired beer, Apple Pomace Punccheon, and bronze in Belgian-Style Sour Ales for Trois Annees Cuvee. Other LA County medals were by Firestone Walker's Propagator (bronze in International-Style Pale Ale for Extra Pale Ale), HiDef Brewing (bronze in Fruited Wood- and Barrel-Aged Sour Beer for Spring Reverb), and HopSaint Brewing (bronze in Other Strong Beer for Random Acts of Greatness). You start to understand why I put greater LA's, combined with OC, craft beer scene above anywhere else's in America. Add multiple wins for Golden Road (gold in Fruit Wheat Beer for Guava Cart, gold in American Fruit Beer for Street Cart, and bronze in German-Style Maerzen for Oktoberfest), and it's further evidence that LA is one of the great beer destinations on the planet.



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Wild Fields Brewhouse



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As I just stated, if you combine LA County and Orange County? No combination of neighboring counties can even *dream* to compete. **Stereo Brewing's** Wall of Sound won silver, its third medal in seven years in the Oatmeal Stout category. Legendary OC staple **The Bruery** took home bronze in Chocolate Beer for Because You're Mine. **Tustin Brewing** garnered a bronze in American Black Ale or American Stout for Midnight Oil and **Unsung Brewing** grabbed a silver in American-Style Strong Pale Ale for Chaos Erupts. And two spots took home their first medals to date: **Laguna Beach Beer Co.**, with a bronze in Fruit Wheat Beer for Tuava Guova, and Anaheim's **Villains Brewing**, with a bronze in American-Style Lager for Saca La Bolsita.

Last but not certainly not least, three more area craft breweries impressively built on the momentum of their previous medals with additional wins this year: Grover Beach's **Apogee Brewing**, winning bronze in Belgian-Style Abbey Ale for Hubble Dubbel, Redlands's **Ritual Brewing**, winning silver in Imperial Stout for Big Deluxe, and Ventura's **Topa Topa Brewing**, winning bronze in Kellerbier or Zwickelbier for Light Hike.

It's always gratifying getting to attend Great American Beer Festival. The best part of it, strangely, *isn't* the beer. It's the people. The excitement in the air. The joy of meeting the folks who make your favorite beers and getting to chat. The enthusiasm from the beer fans who dress up in wild costumes and escape the doldrums of reality for a night. Most of all, it's seeing the brewers at the award

ceremony—the people who work so hard to make the incredible beer we all love, seeing the fruits of their labor pay off. No beer will resonate with me as much as the sight of seeing the outpouring of emotion from the Liquid Gravity team as they waited in line for awards, learning they'd just won Brewery of the Year. You can always buy a great beer, but a moment like that is priceless.

So, cheers to all the many winners from California—it's always wonderful to see you all, and this very pale writer looks forward to drinking the best pales in the world that you all make very, very soon.

*Russell Hainline follows in the proud screenwriter tradition of loving to drink. His newest movie, THE SANTA SUMMIT, airs on Hallmark Channel November 5th. You can find him on TikTok at @thebeertravelguide, on Instagram at @russellhbeer, and on a barstool at any beer establishment in the West LA area.*



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## COVER STORY

## ALL HAIL THE ALPHA KING

by Daniel Drennon



Trevor Walls and the Brewery X brew team

All Photos Credit: Dennis Benson

Trevor Walls is the co-founder and Chief Brewing Officer at Brewery X in Anaheim. Walls is a role model for how to evolve from home brewer to world class pro brewer. There are no short cuts nor substitutes for hard work, paying your dues, getting education, perfecting your craft, and climbing the proverbial ladder for 13 years until you find yourself on the top rung. He began his career in beer at Ballast Point's Home Brew Mart in 2010, became a cellarman at BP, then moved up to The Bruery as a cellarman, and then

brewer. Walls attended the prestigious brewing schools, Siebel in Chicago and Doemens in Munich, graduating in 2012. He returned to brew at Pizza Port Bressi Ranch and then as Head Brewer at Pizza Port San Clemente where he scored a GABF Silver Medal for Coffee Beer.

Walls was just named "The Alpha King" in Denver on the eve of the recent 2023 Great American Beer Festival. The Alpha King competition is regarded as the Holy Grail of Hops. To be named the King signifies that you are the brewer of the best hoppy beer in America. There are over 150 entries from many of the best breweries in the country, all vying for the highly-envied designation as "The Alpha King." Walls had finished third in 2022 when Andrew Bell of nearby neighbor Radiant was the named the Alpha King. Apparently, Anaheim is a bit of a hop capitol!

Under Wall's direction, Brewery X has been a medal-producing machine:

World Beer Cup 2022: Super Slap, Silver, American Style IPA; GABF 2022: Battlesnakes, Bronze, Bohemian Style Pilsner; California Craft Beer Cup: 2021: Stein Me Up, bronze, Munich Helles; Slap & Tickle, Gold, American Pale Ale; Clearly Confused, Gold, Kristalweiss; Watermelon Lime, Silver, Hard Seltzer; 2023: Stein Me Up, Gold, Munich Helles; and, last but not least, ShhhWheat, Silver, Fruit Wheat Beer.

**DRENNON:** *Where were you born and raised and what role did that play in your early development?*

WALLS: Born and raised in Southern Orange County (Laguna Niguel). I was very active in team sports and just enjoyed being outdoors with my friends. My mom and dad were always very supportive in everything I did. Southern Orange County is highly competitive by nature so having an older brother who was a standout athlete always pushed me to work harder so I could be a leader on my sport teams growing up. Now even as an adult, I still get to be on a team and compete on a very high level every day. I kinda like to look at this career like it is "Professional Sport Brewing."

**DRENNON:** *What do you like to do with your free time, presuming you ever have any?*

WALLS: Family time. I have a beautiful wife, Janae, who I met working at Pizza Port SC (she currently pours beer at Docent). We have two amazing daughters who love being outdoors. My family all lives in South OC so we BBQ and get together on weekends frequently. I try to get to Mammoth at least four times a year to hike and fish.

**DRENNON:** *What did you think you wanted to do for a profession before you became a brewer?*

WALLS: Before brewing, I practically

changed my mind every month on what I wanted to do. Whether it was a career in the military, a commercial pilot, working for a sports franchise, or being involved in the action sports industry, I was always a "teams" guy. I just wanted to be part of something special and work with a badass team.

**DRENNON:** *How did you get into brewing?*

WALLS: Since I was a kid, my dad and uncle have always been home brewers. I always thought it was normal for people to make their own beer. When I left high school to attend San Diego State University, I found out that having the knowledge to brew your own beer was very valuable in the neighborhoods of Pacific Beach and Ocean Beach in San Diego circa mid-2000's where craft beer was booming. Me and some friends would brew every weekend and have house parties where we served our beer. People really loved the liquid, so we kept brewing more beer, and soon the house parties turned into block parties. One day I made up my mind and went to the Ballast Point Home Brew Mart where I used to buy my ingredients and basically wouldn't leave until they gave me a job. It worked, and I never turned back.

**DRENNON:** *Which brewers and/or which beers have influenced you?*

WALLS: Colby Chandler who was the Head of R&D and small batch brewing at



The Alpha King Crown



Ballast Point was a great role model in my early days of beer. This dude could make any beer with any ingredient a world-class beer. In 2010 when I had just started at BP, Sculpin was still a small batch beer being brewed 15 barrels at a time in the location I worked. Watching that beer revolutionize IPA over the years was super cool considering I saw its most humble beginnings. John Egan from Stone and Mission Brewing was pivotal to learning work ethic in a brewery environment. I wanted to get experience doing production brewing so when I wasn't at BP Home Brew Mart, John Egan would let me come in and help him brew, clean tanks, clean kegs, any grunt work available to learn how to function in a brewery. Between BP and Mission, I was working 16 hours/day, 7 days /week, but learning from one of the original head brewers of Stone. Sean Farrell from Pizza Port really taught me how to be the leader of a brew crew and operate a brewery on a large level. We opened up Bressi Ranch Pizza Port, and he worked his ass off every day and was respected by everyone around him. He had a very simple but effective way of getting things done that I still implement every day with my team at Brewery X.

**DRENNON: I talked in my intro about your 13-year professional learning curve. Can you share the most important lessons you learned along the way.**

WALLS: Stay focused on the beer and the liquid. Everything else is just noise. Beer, by nature, is meant to bring people together and share our greatest moments of the human experience with one another. These days, even within our own industry, there are so many other distractions out there that cause people to lose sight of the simple, joyful nature of beer. Whether it's the Brewery X team, friends and family, or a patron I sit down with to have a pint, I just try to keep it all positive and fun. To put it simply, I find that the more fun I'm having, more success follows right behind it.

**DRENNON: How valuable was the education you received at Siebel and Doemens?**

WALLS: EXTREMELY. The curriculum gave me technical foundation that I rely on every day and I will have for the rest of my brewing career, but also the travel and relationships I built were something that I'll never forget. I was extremely fortunate to be able to go so early in my career. Having the opportunity to brew abroad all over Europe and learn from some of the best brewers in the world was completely invaluable to me. I try to pass that knowledge onto our BX team as much as possible.

**DRENNON: What was the genesis of Brewery X and what have your biggest challenges so far?**

WALLS: Not a lot of people know that the "X" in Brewery X is a representation for people crossing paths and coming together over beer. That's exactly how we started. There was a life-long group of friends who wanted to start a brewery/restaurant concept. They got connected with our CEO who happened to be a good friend of mine from our days at SDSU. We all started meeting up and traveling to great breweries all over the west coast to get ideas of what we wanted to do. It was cool during the infancy of the brewery, before we even had a building, looking around the table and having pints with other professionals who had lifetimes of success in other industries and seeing through their unique lenses on building a business. This is what makes Brewery X so successful in my opinion. As far as challenges goes, I'd say growing our brewery responsibly is at the forefront of our mission goals. Over the past 10-15 years there have been a lot of great breweries who saw exponential growth in a short period of time, got over-extended, started spending money they didn't have or lost focus on quality standards, then just as quick as it all started, the company and liquid isn't relevant in market and everything is gone. We want to learn from the past, be happy with what we have, and grow at a responsible rate.

**DRENNON: Do you have a brewing philosophy?**



Trevor Walls

WALLS: Keep it simple. There is such a thing as "paralyzes by analyses." I like to just go with what "feels right" based off of experience. I typically don't spend much time buried in technical brewing reports, books, podcasts, or articles. To find the answers, I just try to brew a beer that contains the challenge and apply the values you discover yourself in these situations.

**DRENNON: What are your favorite styles to brew or do you enjoy them all equally?**

WALLS: Every style contains its own set of challenges which are uniquely fun and interesting, but I'd have to say IPA. I love the reaction everyone gets from a good, dank, fresh IPA. I do love drinking Helles or Pilsner after work but working on a new IPA gets me most excited.

**DRENNON: What are your goals for the brewery and for yourself individually as a brewer?**

WALLS: It's important to me to be a good leader to my team at Brewery X. I get the most fulfillment out of working with this group of people we have over here. They've really bought into what we are trying to accomplish in our community as a brewery and work their tails off every day. I try to come into work with a positive attitude, work hard, and have the most damn fun I can, the team there makes that very easy. Brewery X is currently one of the top 15 largest breweries in CA, I'd like to be somewhere up in the top 5 in the next 5 years or so.

**DRENNON: Which is more important: talent or work ethic?**

WALLS: Work ethic all day. I'm not the smartest dude, I'm not the best brewer...I just love playing the game every day.

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

WALLS: That was fun, let's do it again tomorrow.

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**LA BEAT**

# LA BREWERS GUILD MEMBERS NAB 10 MEDALS

by Sean Inman

If you found yourself back in 1987, when the first Great American Beer Festival (GABF) awards were held, there were a mere dozen style categories. Which was probably eleven categories more than most people had heard of back then. Pick your mode of time travel transport back to 2023 and there are 99 categories plus a Pro-Am and collaboration awards. Which means north of 300 medals.

There is no getting around it, any GABF re-cap has to deal in numbers and lists starting with the fact that there were 9,300 entries coming from 2,033 different breweries across the United States. It is so many that it takes 250 judges in three phases of competition over nine days to get through each and every beer. And that is with only a little over 20% of American breweries participating in the yearly event.

Pre- awards, the big news was that the American IPA category had grown so large that West Coast IPA was broken off from the more general IPA category. This change meant that Hazy and Juicy IPA was the biggest category with 365 beers. Don't feel sad. West Coast was still the 2nd largest category. Totally unrelated

to hops, Dessert and Pastry Stouts as a category of its own also debuted this year.

Now that the housekeeping is out of the way, let's take a look at the Los Angeles Brewers Guild and adjacent winners from the 73 total medals that the State of California took home this year:

**Gold Medals**

Claremont Craft Ales for Triple IPA - Imperial IPA

Common Space for Sonrisa – American-style Lager

Highland Park for Hand of Josh - International Pale Ale

Highland Park for DDH Pillow - Imperial Hazy

**Silver Medals**

Angel City for Apple Pomace Puncture - Experimental Beer

Beachwood (Long Beach) for Hoppa Emeritus - American Black Ale

**Bronze Medals**

Angel City for Trois Annees Cuvee – Belgian-style Sour

Firestone Walker's "The Propagator" for Extra Pale Ale - International Pale Ale

HopSaint for Random Acts of Greatness - Other Strong Ale

You can find all of the medal winners at the Great American Beer Festival website in PDF format or in a searchable database

by year, state and style at <https://www.greatamericanbeerfestival.com/the-competition/awards-ceremony/>

Armed with that information you can spend the time until GABF 2024 hunting for and tasting as many medal-winning beers as you can find.

Sean Inman is a Glendale-based writer who has been blogging about the Los Angeles beer scene since 2009 on his @beersearchparty blog.



Common Space celebrates Gold!

All Photos Courtesy of Common Space



Common Space brew team enjoys a Gold Medal-winning Sonrisa

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**OC BEAT**

# A BREWER'S DOZEN AT GABF

by David Mulvihill

Orange County Brewers received a total of 12 medals at the 2023 Great American Beer Festival.

With three medals awarded, **Docent Brewing Company** was OC's big winner at GABF 2023. "Hearing your name once is good enough, but hearing it three times is really amazing!" remarked head brewer Bryan Giesen. Super Tonic, received its 3rd consecutive medal in the Coffee Stout or Porter category, this time Silver. The beer received GABF gold medals in 2020 and 2022. Bronze medal for Docent in the American-Style Pale Ale category (149 entries) for Double Nickels, a beer that also was awarded World Beer Cup silver in 2018, and for Trabuco, in the American-style Brown category. The three 2023 medals bring Docent's GABF total to six.

San Clemente's **Lost Winds Brewing Co** rose to the top of the GABF medal charts, besting 160 entries with its Gold medal in the Fruited American Sour Ale category. At press time Brandon Winneker's Huckleberry pHin Sour was still available at the brewery. Brandon and Lost Winds also earned Gold at World Beer Cup 2022 for its Beach Hoppin' Pale.

AB InBev's **Golden Road Brewing**, Huntington Beach also received OC Gold for its Guava Cart.

After being out of rotation for over a year **Stereo Brewing's** owner-brewer Rick Smets decided it was time to brew Wall of Sound Oatmeal Stout again. Its GABF 2023 entry in the Oatmeal Stout category would garner a Silver medal. Wall of Sound previously scored GABF Gold in 2017 and Bronze in 2018. Stereo's GABF medal count to-date is now six.

**Unsung Brewing Co's** Silver medal came in the American-Style Strong Pale Ale category (123 entries) for Chaos Erupts, bringing its GABF medal total to three.

In speaking with him about this year's achievements, **Beachwood Brewing's**

Julian Shrago was quick to point to the extreme efforts his amazing team puts forth to make it all come together. That resulted in a bronze medal for Beachwood Huntington Beach in the Scottish-Style Ale category, and the silver medal Beachwood Long Beach (L.A. County) received for its Hoppa Emeritus Black IPA.

Black IPA would score Danny Quinonez (**Tustin Brewing Company**) his first GABF Medal, bronze for Midnight Oil. Danny was ecstatic when this reporter met with him on the Monday and Tuesday following the awards. Not one to rest on his laurels, Danny was already anticipating receipt of the judging notes for his other GABF entries so he could get to work improving his recipes and techniques for competitions to come.

In the American Fruit Beer Category, **Laguna Beach Beer Co** and brewer Christian Mansfield received their first GABF medal for Tuava Guava.

Bronze for Because You're Mine was the medal in the Chocolate Beer category for **The Bruery**.

And, still in its infancy and only open for a few months, **Villains Brewing Co** in Anaheim scored Bronze in the American-Style Lager category (123 Entries) for Saca La Bolsita.

Last, but emphatically not least, Trevor Walls of **Brewery X** was named "The Alpha King" in a fierce national competition that designates the winner as best hoppy beer-maker in America. But that is well-documented in this month's cover story!

*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.*



Docent Brewing's Brett Giesen, Bryan Giesen, Jack Stafford  
Photo Credit: David Mulvihill



Lost Winds Brewing's Tim Thralls and Brandon Winneker  
Photo Credit: David Mulvihill



Tustin Brewing Co's Daniel Quinones  
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Laguna Beach Beer's Hugo & Christian  
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Stereo Brewing's Rick Smets and Jeremy Blundo

Photo Credit: David Mulvihill

## BOOK PREVIEW

# THE RISE OF LA BEER...AND FALL OF STRAND BREWING

by Joel Peter Elliott

The Bomber Could Save the Brewery

In February of this year, Daniel Drennon asked me to write a series of articles for *Beer Paper* based on the book I'm writing about my experience helping to build craft beer in Los Angeles starting in 2009 and ending just after covid when my brewery, Strand Brewing Co., was closed. My name is Joel Elliott, co-founder and former CEO, brewer, and graphic designer for Strand.

The idea was that these would be "excerpts" from the book. But if I'm being honest, as this project has evolved, sometimes it's the other way around. Either way, the reader should expect the unexpected because they aren't really "articles" in the traditional sense. Daniel has given me a great deal of latitude and creative freedom. I've taken that and run with it. Because I tend to wander around an idea anyway. I hope you enjoy.

Several weeks ago, Tomm Carroll invited me to participate in a panel discussion about how it was that breweries have managed to survive the last few years. Or, in my case, didn't.

Without any evidence to support my claim, the overwhelming feeling I got

from the other panelists, all current brewery owners, is that this thing still isn't over. The second coming of the "roaring twenties" that we were promised post-covid hasn't materialized. And there isn't much faith that it ever will. The consensus seems to be that this is going to be a long, steady climb out for a while yet to come. I believe I saw the stress in their eyes.

I know the feeling. It's a lot.

The economics of running a brewery is likely not what you think. I have always been surprised at the number of people looking in from the outside that believe a brewery is a printing press... for printing money. Wouldn't that be nice. The truth is that a brewery is a business. One that sells art. And is feed and taxed heavily for the privilege of doing so.

There are always hurdles when you're running a business. Early on, the struggles were related to being unknown and misunderstood. Sure, we had that one hop shortage in the beginning. And plastic kegs were a problem for some of us for a minute there. But we were never faced with the economic pressures that breweries are running into at present.

By the time Strand had shuttered last



*A flight in the Strand tap room*

*All Photos Credit: Joel Peter Elliott*

September, the price of our base malt was nearly 400% more than it was when we opened in 2009. Between the external pressures from foreign countries wanting to import it for food, and the fact that several dozen months ago the overall North American barley yield was something like 40% of what was projected, the price graph is a hockey stick.

A grain salesman once relayed that the vast swathes of central North America, where domestic barley is grown, is normally blanketed in favorable temperatures, but that temperate blob on the weather map has been slowly migrating northward year over year and has finally gotten far enough that it is leaving the crops behind to suffer in the heat.

Of course, the climate is changing. It's what things in the universe do. They change. Everything does. Sometimes it's called Evolution. Sometimes it's called Entropy. But I don't like that theory. Entropy. I think it's myopic and particularly pessimistic. The idea sits in a box, the boundaries of which are man's own limitations. Entropy only works if there's an ending.

One of the topics that Tomm addressed, I can't remember which, really got me thinking about brewery size and its impact on the viability of the business. There's always been a sort of "no go" zone. You be small or you be big. But you don't be medium. Not for long anyway.

And that thought got me thinking about how we did things in the beginning. What solutions we came up with to get over our

hurdles. What had we done, those of us that made it through those very lean times that define the birth of a brewery? What was successful, and what wasn't?

Maybe that experience could help breweries today.

### Brewery Size

Generally speaking, it was that 3-5 thousand barrels per year size that you wanted to grow through as quickly as possible. That's where it really hurt. The exact numbers have probably changed more recently but the theory is still valid. Unless you own the building you're in outright, there's just no margin in that medium zone. It would seem. The machine simply isn't efficient enough yet.

In the early 2010's, the way we made the business really hum was when we were at about 2500 barrels per year. At that size, you're maximizing the cost of the lease, of your labor, and of your equipment.

Unfortunately, AB/In-Bev sparked a goldrush when they started overpaying for craft breweries about a decade ago. But that's over. You're not going to sell your brewery for a zillion dollars anymore. Don't size it to sell it. Size it to run it.

### Tap Room

Right or wrong, tap rooms have sort of evolved into these restaurant clones. It became a thing that a brewery needed to present itself well. But there's a lot of idle square footage that comes with that approach. Overlap your retail space with your production or storage space. Maximize its utility and you lower the

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cost of your real estate. If you have to move pallets outside at night to make space for the tap room, do it. People love to feel like they're being immersed in the process. That seems to have been taken away. We've gradually separated our customers from what we do. Sure, they can stand there and look at tanks. But they want to be in it.

One of the old school tap rooms that's still going is the one at Monkish in Torrance. That front office space used to be the entire thing. It's like 150 square feet including the bathroom. It wasn't until Henry expanded into the adjacent unit that there was enough room to expand the retail space into that northeast corner of the warehouse.

**Own Your Kegs**

I've used a couple different leasing programs and studied many of the others. They all promise the stars but unless you're doing heavy draft sales at an extended radius, they tend to suck up quite a bit of margin. The math seems to always get garbled in the sales pitch. They will use the smoke and mirrors of translating a monthly cost into cost per fill to their advantage. And that whole "maintenance" argument at this scale is hogwash. Kegs are indestructible. A keg only needs to be turned around 10-15 times and it's paid for itself. Keg maintenance is no big deal if you run a solid cleaning regime.

Figure something like fifteen to twenty percent of your float should be in-house at any given time being cleaned and refilled. That's a good number of kegs to start off with. From there, you should always need more. That's how you know it's working.

**Self Distribution**

Keep your footprint small. Find a great salesperson and make them a partner. Build personal relationships with your wholesale customers. If you're local, make great beer, and are available to them, they will bend over backward for you. They will do what it takes to rotate you in and out as needed. Get away from this idea that a tap handle is "yours". Use the fluidity to your advantage. Help your wholesale customers remain fresh and relevant in the marketplace. If they succeed, you succeed.



A pint of Strand Flying Cat IPA

This is key. Because you should use draft as a kind of pressure relief valve. Put your focus and attention on tap room and packaged beer. That's where margin can be found. Use draft as a way to keep your name out there and sell what's left after you package. This way you don't waste a drop.

**The Bomber**

The economics of the bomber may astonish you. Forgive me, for those of you that don't know, a "bomber" is a 22oz glass bottle. Typically brown in color, sealed with a pry-off metal crown and it stands about twelve inches tall. Until about 2014, the bomber was craft's standard format for packaging beer. They are sold in single units at the retail level, typically for between \$6-\$10 per bottle, but can go as high as \$20 or more, depending on the flavor of the sauce inside.

Most of us had these old bottling machines built by Dave Meheen. He was an engineer and a brewer and he saw an opportunity to build a simple, relatively inexpensive packaging solution for craft breweries. So he went into business. Surprise, they were called Meheens. They were simple alright, but they had bugs and quirks that made them an adventure to operate. It was a team sport and we hated that we loved those machines.

Each one, particularly the older versions, had a distinct personality of its own. You could only keep one running once you had gotten to know it intimately. Occasionally, they would get all out of sorts and start launching glass everywhere. It was impossible to know why. If it wasn't a bubble in the backpressure sensor line, you might hunt for a reason all day long. And Dave was famous for his unwillingness to give any helpful advice over the phone. You could get him on the horn but all he would say was: send it up and I'll take a look at it.

But then there were times when they would hum along perfectly. We usually wouldn't talk when that happened. Superstition, I think.

If I were still running a brewery right now, I'd ditch the canner and package into bombers. Aluminum as a commodity is difficult to dabble in. You're up against some of the largest corporations in the entire universe and the factories know who's paying their bills. It's not you.

Sure, glass has its shortcomings: it's heavy, and markets probably aren't set up to shelve them at present. Neither were they back then. We, as an industry managed to change that. Plus, right now, there are a whole bunch of decommissioned Meheens just sitting around waiting to be snatched up. I bet you could get a six-head Wizard model for \$15k right now. And some of us still know how to run them.

Anyway, canning machines sound terrible. Like feeding tin tokens into a clothes dryer on a hot day. They hiss and pop and click. You feel in your heart the emptiness of an unfilled aluminum can when it hits the floor. There's no weight to it. No soul.

And full cans nearly make no sound at all. Working on a canning line is a lonely experience. In my experience.

But bottles. All that glass in motion sounds like church bells.

And entropy only works if there's an ending.

*Joel Peter Elliott was the co-founder and brewer for Strand Brewing. Each month, Beer Paper will feature an excerpt from his forthcoming book, The Rise of LA Beer...and the Fall of Strand Brewing. You can follow Joel on Instagram @strandbrewingco or at strandbrewing.com*



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## BOOK REVIEW

# BEER & CIDER: YOU CAN LOVE BOTH!

by Sean Inman

I cracked open *The Beer Lover's Guide to Cider* with both hope and sadness. The exact same day that Beth Demmon's book arrived at my doorstep was the day that I heard that Reverend Nat's Cider from Portland, Oregon was ending its cider making run.

But hope, because within days of that, I saw a post on social media proclaiming that our own Benny Boy Brewing and Cidery had made the *Sunset Magazine* "Best of" list for this year.

Such is the world of craft cider. Seemingly more volatile than even craft beers ups and downs over the last few years.

But enough beverage economics and back to the book. Demmon is expert in beer and cider and it shows in this book. She has found a new perspective by tying beer to cider and teasing out both the similarities and the differences. Added to that, she adds to our collective knowledge about the history of cider in addition to the simple pleasure of drinking and enjoying cider.

You will be looking up Madison Ruffin and Jupiter Evans to find out the roles they played in the history of cider in America.

You will be looking up apple varieties like Stoke Red or Ashmead's Kernel. And most importantly, you will be looking up the cideries near to Los Angeles and those further afield so that you can plan a visit to their tasting rooms.

The set-up is simple (and color coded). Each chapter selects a beer style or beer flavor profile and then leads you to cider examples that are in the same ballpark as that style. So, if you are a fan of pilsners and lagers, you get ten suggested ciders that have some of the same characteristics. There is a chapter devoted to hops, sours, fruit, Belgian and farmhouse, imperial (aka - high ABV) and ending with specialty ciders.

But that is not really the end because the final chapter breaks away from beer to present ciders for cider lovers. After building connections through the book, setting that aside to make sure that cider gets its fair due is a smart move. It effectively pulls cider out of beer's shadow.

If the book were just a selection of ciders, that would be enough but each of those selections comes with either additional recommendations, information about

the cider producer or, most importantly, food pairings. This is where the book really shines. Demmon really stretches to find both unique and comfort foods that will bring out and enhance a ciders flavor. World cuisine is brought into play more so than I have seen in most food and drinks books and there is thought to the vegetarian and vegans as well. Those foodie paragraphs showed real care when it would have been easy to just say, cheese.

You also see that care in her conclusion where she not only urges people to dive into the realm of cider but to also ask questions about the producers from a moral and ethical standpoint. Refreshing to see that said simply and effectively without agenda attached to it. Demmon has a sneaky sense of humor in the book as well, adding goblin boogers to the list of ingredients in a milkshake IPA while making sure to emphasize that taste is individual.

I do have to comment on the book design though which, to me, really lets all the great writing and information down. First, the font choice and size made me feel old. It is really small and the footnotes even smaller. I almost went looking for a magnifying glass. And though I liked the

color coding for each chapter, I thought the photos used at each break did not pop and were too on the nose. The hoppy beer chapter has a photo of a bunch of faded hops in a stock image look. But the photos were better than the little drawings that accompanied each new cider which had a childlike emoji feel to them. The illustrations could have been axed and the font embiggened. Maybe future editions, which I would like to see, will come with a clearer re-design.

In the final analysis, *The Beer Lover's Guide to Cider* succeeds because of the knowledge and empathy of Demmon that is on every page of this book. It also succeeds because I have already dog-eared pages for cider makers like Sincere Cider in Napa and Durham Cider + Wine Co. and Two Broads Ciderworks, both in San Luis Obispo, as places that I need to add to my to-drink list and that you will also.

*Sean Inman is a Glendale-based writer who has been blogging about the Los Angeles beer scene since 2009 on his @beersearchparty blog.*

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