

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

*Bottled & Kegged: San Diego's Craft Brew Culture*. An exhibition at the San Diego History Center--April 6, 2013 to January 20, 2014.

Reviewed by Ernie B. Liwag, independent scholar.

San Diego County is best known for sun, sand, surf, and now suds. In 2009, *Men's Journal* labeled San Diego the Beer Capital of the United States, a title seconded by *Time* magazine in 2012. Boasting an impressive twenty medals in 2011 and fifteen in 2012 at the Great American Beer Festival (GABF), the Olympics of Beer, San Diego County won more medals than most states. In fact, at the 2012 GABF, Oregon and Colorado were the only states that won more medals than San Diego County. San Diego's beer industry is so important to the region that on June 1, 2012, then City of San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders declared June "Craft Beer Month" in San Diego. For all the accolades county brewers have earned over the years, it isn't just the art or science of brewing that has elevated the region to brewing prominence, but the development of a truly unique brewing culture that enabled San Diego County to become the Beer Capital of the United States. The exhibition *Bottled & Kegged: San Diego's Craft Brew Culture* at the San Diego History Center seeks to educate visitors on just how San Diego became America's top brewing region. It features hands-on and interactive displays, detailed timelines, video documentaries, and regularly scheduled events highlighting all facets of the craft brewing culture from brewing education to beer tastings.

Beer is essentially made up of four basic ingredients: barley, hops, water, and yeast. Depending on several varied factors within those basic ingredients, in combination with the brewer's attention to time and temperatures in both the cooking and fermentation phases, several styles of beer are created. A segment of the exhibit is dedicated to the science of brewing and educates visitors on the basic brewing process. An example of the basic equipment needed to begin home brewing allows visitors the opportunity to touch and use equipment. Along with visual aids, the exhibit allows visitors to smell, touch, and feel common brewing ingredients. As part of the ingredients section of the exhibit, yeast is

displayed under a microscope and its importance in brewing is discussed in depth through video tutorials. Interested visitors may attend special educational events held within the exhibit. One event focuses on how to begin home brewing while another offers a tasting presentation about the effects of yeast on flavor. Of the four basic ingredients, water is the one most often regarded as having little impact in the brewing process, but this cannot be further from the truth. Most San Diego County municipalities contain high levels of sulphates as compared to other regions throughout the state. As the exhibit points out, sulphates are a contributing factor in brewing “hoppier” beers. The hoppy character of many local beers, as well as the push for continued innovation by all brewers in San Diego County, is an essential part of brewing culture.

San Diego County’s earliest inhabitants, the Kumeyaay, fermented beverages made from cactus, manzanita, elder berries, and other botanicals. But beer, as we know it today, was first brewed by Conrad Doblner, an Austrian immigrant who in 1868 became San Diego’s first commercial brewer. He opened the San Diego Brewery, producing beers replicating traditional European recipes. The exhibit’s detailed timeline begins with Doblner’s arrival in San Diego and proceeds to significant events such as Prohibition and technological advances like refrigeration that shaped San Diego’s brewing industry.

One particular period that the timeline showcases begins in 1949, when the American brewing industry went through a period of consolidation. This ultimately led to the closing of the last commercial beer producer in San Diego, Altes Brewing Company, in 1953. Not until 1987 would another commercial brewer operate in San Diego. The end of the timeline displays San Diego craft breweries from 1987 to 2013, highlighting the resurgence of the brewing industry beginning with Paul Holburn and Craig Stromberg’s 1987 opening of Bolt Brewery. While short-lived, Bolt Brewery marked a successful return to commercial brewing in San Diego, which could not have been possible without two important pieces of legislation. In 1978 under President Jimmy Carter, the federal government legalized home brewing nationwide. In 1982, California passed legislation allowing licensed beer manufacturers to “sell beer and wine, regardless of source, to consumers.” This, combined with local entrepreneurial spirit, led to a culture of brewing in San Diego that is unique.

Although brewing in San Diego ceased until the opening of Bolt Brewery in 1987, the development of a recognizable San Diego beer culture continued among consumers. During the era of nationwide brewing consolidation, San Diegans continued to have a taste for beers that differed from mass-marketed beers across the country. They turned their attention to imports from Mexico, and when packaging technology improved, European beer expanded San Diegans’ choice of beer.

The exhibit showcases a section on Mexico's impact on San Diego's craft beer culture. Visitors can examine recovered artifacts like an impressive mural, dining table, and chairs from the Aztec Brewing Company's original San Diego tap room. The exhibit also includes a detailed timeline of Mexico's Prohibition-era breweries as one of the many roots of San Diego's brewing culture. While the ratification of the eighteenth Amendment may have sunk the brewing industry from about fifteen hundred breweries to thirty-three across the United States, San Diegans' taste for local, independent, and frankly different beers than those produced by national brewers never ceased. During Prohibition, San Diegans flocked to the Mexican border town of Tijuana to fill their need for beer. Over 180 cantinas and La Ballena, "the longest bar in the world," were established during this time. Aztec Brewing Company and Mexicali Brewery, both based in Mexicali, emerged to meet the San Diego region's demand for beer during Prohibition. After repeal of the amendment, tourism to Tijuana slowed sharply, forcing Aztec Brewing Company to follow their market and establish operations across the border in San Diego in what is now known as Barrio Logan. They joined the surviving San Diego Brewing Company and upstart Balboa Brewing Company as the local brewers.

The exhibit displays typical home brewing equipment and details the influence of home brewers and the Quality Ale and Fermentation Fraternity (QUAFF), a homebrewer club, on the San Diego Brewing Culture. Homebrewers in San Diego pushed the limits on styles of beers, innovating and blending styles to create classes of beer all their own. Although not officially a beer category as recognized by beer festivals like the GABF, India Pale Ales brewed in San Diego County are viewed by industry brewers across the nation as a distinct class of their own. While home brewing was legalized nationwide in 1978, it was community organizing by QUAFF that truly infused home brewing characteristics in the commercial scene. When QUAFF homebrewers took that next step to professional brewing, they were supported and promoted by their fraternal organization. As other brewers moved into the professional arena, QUAFF and any newly established brewery supported them. While historically the national brewers' prominence is built on cutthroat business tactics to capture market share, San Diego industry's prominence is built on camaraderie and partnership between breweries. In fact, the exhibit dedicates a wall describing the collaborative nature of brewers in the San Diego brewing industry. This community to business collaboration is unique and is an essential part of not only San Diego's brewing culture but the local industry's success as a whole.

*Bottled and Kegged* presents an engaging array of displays that shed light on both the history of brewing in San Diego County and the nature of the region's current craft beer industry. The curators have done an admirable job bringing

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together scientific explication, artifacts, and multimedia presentations that capture the attention and satisfy the curiosity of visitors. The exhibit's all-senses approach delivers an impressive view into San Diego's culture of craft brewing.



*Bottled & Kegged features Home Brew Mart's old 15-barrel brewing system. Photo by Matt Schiff.*



*The exhibit showcases the expansive brewer list as well as the sheer variety of styles produced in San Diego County. Photo by Matt Schiff.*