

**36 local simple fresh**



Guy Hand

Microbrews thrive in the Pacific Northwest. Portland's Deschutes Brewery inspires Boise favorites like Tablerock, Sockeye and Payette.

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# 3 Back to CRAFT

by Guy Hand with research by Greg Randleman

**K**evin Dinius cocked his head to one side, as if trying to slide all the brewery names into a neat row before he spoke. “We’ve got Wallace Brewing from Wallace, Idaho,” he began to the distant thump of a Lynyrd Skynyrd cover band. “We’ve got Payette Brewing from Boise, we’ve got Sun Valley, Von Scheidt out of Twin Falls, Table Rock, The Ram, Portneuf Valley Brewing out of Pocatello and Laughing Dog from Sandpoint.”

Including his own Crescent Brewery in Nampa, 13 Idaho breweries were dispensing beer at the first ever all-Idaho Brewers Festival at Nampa’s Lakeview Park on a sunny July day in 2011. “There’s no Bud Light here; there’s no Coors,” Dinius said with a smile. “It’s all Idaho beer, all craft beer.”

When this first-of-a-kind, all-Idaho beerfest was described to Idaho beer historian Herman Ronnenberg a few days later, he called it “magical.” For decades, Ronnenberg has researched the Idaho beer industry; he’s written numerous books on the subject from *Beer and Brewing in the Inland*

*Northwest to The Beer Baron of Boise.* Not surprisingly, his friends call him “Doctor Beer.” Yet, on the phone from his home in Troy, Ronnenberg seemed truly taken aback by the notion that Idaho now contained enough commercial beer brewers to pull together what could actually be called a “festival.”

At the time, there were 19 commercial brewers in Idaho. Although that number paled compared to the hundreds of breweries operating in Oregon and Washington, compared to none at all in Idaho—which is Ronnenberg’s baseline—that number was remarkable. In 1978, when Ronnenberg came to Idaho to work on his Ph.D., “there was no brewery in the state of Idaho,” he said. “I was beginning to research breweries and it was completely a dead subject at that point.” From 1960 to 1985—for a full quarter of a century—not a single Idahoan commercially brewed beer. “So an Idaho Brewers Festival,” Ronnenberg said, “to me it’s still like magical that there is such a thing.”

It seemed a little magical to the brewers who were actually participating in the festival. Crescent City brewer and festival organizer Dinius said it was the first time that Nampa had permitted a beer festival of any type within its city limits. “I think it’s a sign of the changing times,” he said. The brewers, who often work in isolation from their peers, seemed pleasantly stunned to simply be standing next to other Idaho brewers. “We are working with the Huckleberry Cream Ale today,” the Laughing Dog brewer said as he hoisted a pint. Sockeye Brewing was pushing its Wooley Bugger Wheat; Wallace Brewery, its Jack Leg Stout; Von Scheidt, its Sour Mash Corn Porter.

Ronnenberg said the recent surge in local brewing reminded him of Idaho’s original beer-brewing heyday. Back in 1889, he said, Idaho had dozens of breweries scattered across the territory, but the excitement then was fueled not by cream ale and Wooley Bugger Wheat, but by gold fever and the unquenchable thirst of gold miners. Ronnenberg said Idaho’s very first brewery started in Lewiston in 1862, a stepping-stone to the mining camps in Orofino, Pierce and Elk City. “As the miners move down into the Boise Basin,” Ronnenberg explained, “you get breweries there and as they move into Silver City, there, and very soon you get breweries in Boise and little places that you don’t think of like Rocky Bar.”

Idaho City had several breweries during those gold rush days (but the number had less to do with demand than the town’s bad luck. In 1865, 1867, 1868 and 1871 Idaho City had massive fires and each time rebuilt much of the town from scratch, including its breweries. Boise, functioning as the in-between town for the mines of Silver City and Idaho City, had several breweries. By 1889, there were approximately 25 Idaho cities with one or



Idaho State Historical Society

Germans pioneered beer-making in Boise. Czech-style pilsners followed the railroad-era Bohemian migration to Boise's South 8th Street. Pictured: advertising beer in the 1930s.

more breweries for a total of 33 statewide. Only very recently has the state approached that number again.

Before the Civil War, Ronnenberg said American brewers often followed British brewing traditions; much like modern craft brewers, their saloons served dark pints of ale, porter and stout. The mining camp brewers were different. Most were immigrants from German-speaking countries steeped in the love of lager. Ronnenberg estimates that "over 90 percent" of the beers served in the mining camps "were lager, lager, lager." That's one sharp distinction between Idaho's 19th century brewers and today's lager-shunning craft beer makers. But both—separated by over a century of time—believed fervently in the value of one thing: small-scale, locally produced beer.

Back then brewers didn't have much of a choice. Beer was about as perishable as milk and brewers had to brew close to the mining camps they

served. When those camps moved on, so did the brew masters. When the gold rush began to ebb, brewers settled into the farm towns. Along with the bakeries, hardware stores and jailhouses, breweries became local institutions.

By the 1870s, change began to threaten Idaho breweries. Large

Eastern and Midwestern brewers had perfected a method of pasteurizing their beer. With a far longer shelf life, those brewers could then ship that pasteurized beer to the far corners of the country in railcars cooled with block ice.

Idaho brewers soon felt the heat of outside competition and reacted by advertising the virtues of local Idaho

beer. In an echo of today's local food movement,

a Boise beer baron named John Lemp declared his beer "honest beer" made with

"Idaho hops and barley" and reminded his customers that "the money you spend

helps to employ Idaho labor." In the northern Idaho mining town of Wallace, an ad

urged citizens to "patronize home industry by drinking Wallace beer." That was in the 1890s. "You

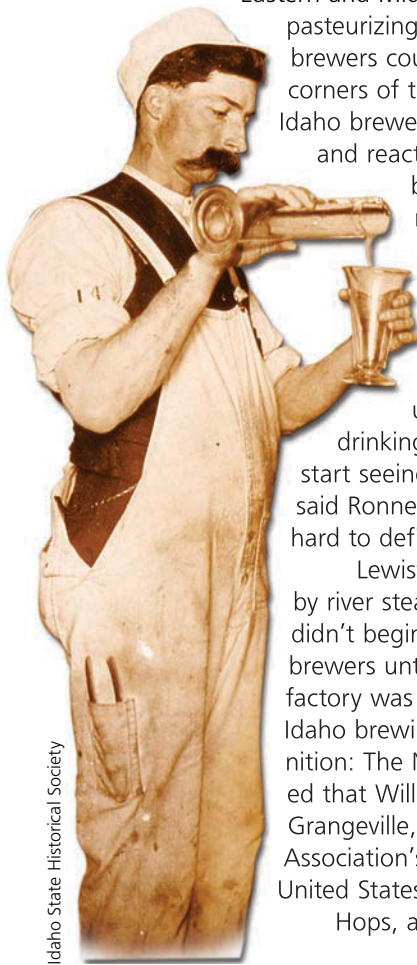
start seeing these 'support local industry' ads early on," said Ronnenberg, but the term "local" was often as hard to define then as it is today.

Lewiston's brewery had to have its barley shipped by river steamer from the Pacific Coast. Idaho farmers didn't begin producing enough barley to supply local brewers until the early 1900s. In 1907, a barley-malting factory was constructed in Idaho Falls. A few years later, Idaho brewing-barley production received national recognition: The Nov. 3, 1911, *Idaho County Free Press* reported that William Von Berge, a brewer and farmer in Grangeville, won the National Brewers and Hop Growers Association's prize for the best brewing barley in the United States.

Hops, another fundamental ingredient of beer making,

were also imported from outside Idaho in the early days. Before 1894,

hops were shipped from Puyallup, Washington Territory, but in 1887 mites devastated the Puyallup crop, forcing growers to move production to eastern



Idaho State Historical Society

Boise brewers fought pasteurized imports in the 1870s by promoting local hops and "honest beer."

Pictured: a Boise brewmeister.



Washington and Idaho. In 1894, Idaho growers began experimenting with hop varieties around Mountain Home, Payette, Moscow and Juliaetta—but with mixed results. Moscow’s first crop consisted of one plant yielding about half a pound of hops; Juliaetta produced a single bale, Mountain Home’s crop failed altogether, but Payette grew 33 acres of top-quality hops. The Sept. 4, 1894, *Idaho Register* reported that about 100 pickers and several spectators were drawn to the novelty of Idaho’s first real commercial hop crop. By 1899, Idaho was reported to be one of the few states with a notable increase in hop production.

Still, Idaho’s increasing ability to grow its own beer-making ingredients didn’t insulate it against outside competition any more effectively than it does today. By the late 1800s, mega-brewers like Schlitz and Pabst were shipping large quantities of pasteurized beer to any Western town with a rail line. “You’re making 600 barrels a year,” Ronnenberg said of Idaho’s small brewers of the time, “and you’re trying to compete with a guy who is making 600,000.”

Historians frequently cite the post-World War II era as the point when industrialization and consolidation began to dominate America’s food system, but Idaho’s local beer industry began to falter under the pressure of outside industrial competition a half century earlier, in the 1890s. Then came Prohibition. “Of course, it’s the great knockout punch for American brewing,” Ronnenberg said. Idaho went dry in 1916. During the ensuing 17 years of Prohibition, owners of local breweries retooled their facilities to produce other goods, mothballed them or simply left them to rot. Idaho’s first brewery in Lewiston burned down. The breweries in Coeur d’Alene and Moscow began producing vinegar. The Nampa brewery turned to a non-alcoholic fruit drink. Others were



Idaho State Historical Society

Beer King John Lemp toasted German unification at Turnverein Hall on Boise’s Sixth Street in 1871.



Payette Brewing Company

Boise's Payette Brewing Company, founded in 2010, runs a 15-tank brewing system. The Garden City brewery is the first in Idaho to can beer.

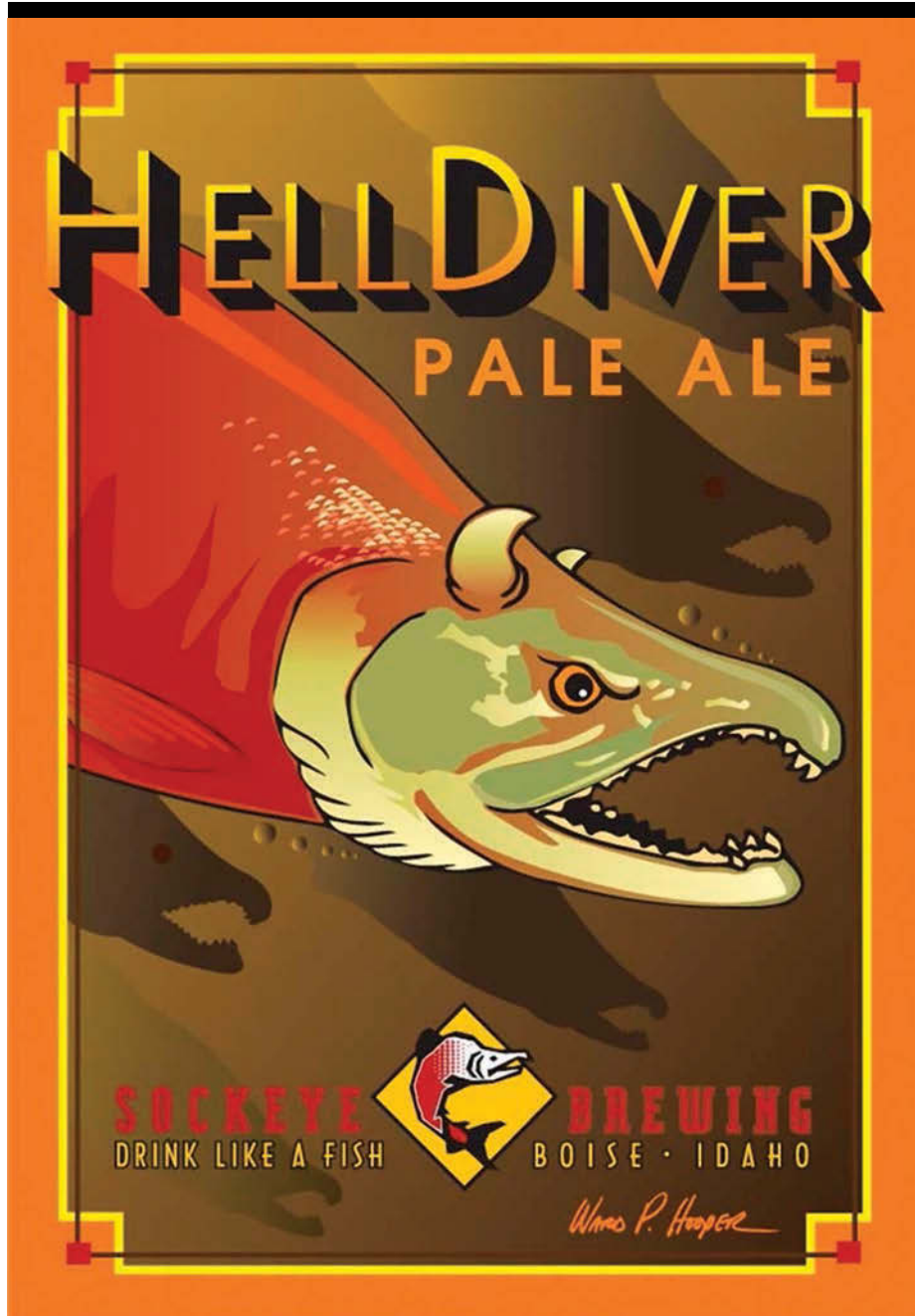
converted into storage stations and auto body shops.

After Prohibition's repeal in 1933, Lemp's brewery was quick to reopen. Its owners were now out-of-state. Also in 1933, Bohemian Breweries Inc. reopened a Boise brewery. Overland Beverage Co. began brewing beer again in Nampa and the town of Wallace reopened its brewery in 1934. In 1935, Pilsner Brewery opened in Idaho Falls and East Idaho Brewery opened in Pocatello.

Yet, said Ronnenberg, "It wasn't easy for small brewers to come back." Unable to have brewed beer for nearly two decades, brewers had to relearn the craft. "They can't find a man who knows how to run the equipment,"

Ronnenberg said of Idaho's reopened breweries. "The market is down, they start up but they don't do well and these little places just start closing in droves." The first to go was Pilsner Brewery in 1939, then Overland Beverage in 1950 and East Idaho Brewery in 1954. The longest lasting brewery was in Boise, but it only outlived the rest by six years. Bohemian Breweries closed its doors in 1960. The vacuum created first by Prohibition, then by the demise of local, post-Prohibition breweries was quickly filled by Schlitz, Pabst and Budweiser. "The big guys," as Ronnenberg called them, "who have the capital to do everything they need. So you look at the percentage of beer brewed by the top 10 brewers in America and it goes from like 30 percent to like 90 percent of the market. They just take over because they have the capital, the expertise, the distribution network."

That's why Ronnenberg found it so remarkable that in the 1980s, the national craft beer movement began to challenge the domination of ever larger, more distant beer makers. Decades before the *New Oxford American Dictionary* named locavore its 2007 word of the year, microbrewers across



Sockeye Brewing Company

Hell Diver Pale Ale is one of six beers handcrafted at the Sockeye Brewing Company on Cole Road in Boise.



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Treasure Valley Food and Wine Blog

Bracing for the thirsty mob at Boise's 2011 Beerfest. A dispute with park officials has since forced the festival to Meridian.

the country were again touting the virtues of local beer, echoing the chant of their 19th century brethren. What they didn't share with their pioneering kin was a love of lager. Modern, small-scale brewers nearly all rejected the uniformly pale brews typical of those former mining camps and the current big-name brands for dark, often extra hoppy "anti-lagers"—beer varieties that were reminiscent of those favored in pre-Civil War America.

Ronnenberg says Idaho caught the micro-brewing bug in 1985. That's when Snake River Brewing opened in a hop field near Caldwell. A new brewery in Coeur d'Alene opened in 1987. Both are gone now, but they were soon followed by Table Rock, Sun Valley Brewing and a slow, but steady trickle of others who opened and are even flourishing.

Idaho has meanwhile increased hops and barley yields. Idaho grows about 10 percent of the nation's hops and is No. 1 in barley. That doesn't mean, however, that those basic brewing ingredients are any easier for Idaho beer makers to procure locally than they were in the late 1800s.

Although Idaho is home to numerous hop producers—including the 1,600-acre Elk Mountain hop farm near Bonners Ferry, perhaps the world's largest—Idaho hops are overwhelmingly sold to the large national brewers. Elk Mountain, for instance, contracts nearly all of its hop harvest to the Budweiser-Michelob and Natural Light behemoth Anheuser-Busch. Southern Idaho hop farmers sell most of their crop to an international broker, not individual brewers.

Grower Diane Hass said that she and other hop growers would be happy to cater to Idaho's budding craft-brewing industry, but explained it isn't large enough yet to order hops in quantities that are profitable for growers. It's much easier, Hass said, for hop farmers to build relationships with craft brewers in states with a higher concentration, like Washington and Oregon. "There are some farms that that's all they do in Oregon and eastern Washington," she said.

Idaho-grown barley is also difficult for the state's relatively small number of craft brewers to procure. Although local barley is mostly malted in Pocatello, it's then shipped to Vancouver, Washington, mixed with other barleys and packaged for nationwide distribution. Nevertheless, Idaho craft brewers are continuing to grow and as they do, their ability to procure the raw materials they need—whether Idaho-grown or not—will also grow.

When the first annual Idaho Brewers Festival was held in Nampa in July 2011, participants were proud to say that Idaho had 19 breweries up and running. By January 2013, that number had jumped to 32, according to Sheila Francis, president of the recently formed Idaho Brewers United, a non-profit whose stated goal is strengthening Idaho craft beer. "It's a huge jump," Francis wrote in an email—and just one brewery shy of Idaho's 1889 brewing heyday. That historical highpoint will be surpassed soon as Idaho enters what is clearly a new heyday of commercial beer making. "I know of at least six other breweries in planning," Francis added, "and that's just in the Boise area."

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