

Quality and Education at the Heart of Craft Beer Distribution

By **TONY FORDER**

The immersion into craft beer at Peerless Distributing Co. in Union, NJ has been a gradual one.

"We've always been proactive and open-minded about brands. We were one of the first to get involved with imports," said Vice President Chuck Salzman. Indeed, Peerless was the first distributor in the US to import Guinness post-prohibition. They took on Anchor, Boston Beer (Sam Adams) and Sierra Nevada early in the craft beer movement.

Prohibition features strongly in Peerless' past, and not just because of its proximity to the former brewing capital of Newark. During Prohibition Salzman's grandfather ran a Seltzer truck. After Prohibition, he merged with Jake Beim who was bottling Crescent Soda; the two created Peerless Beverage Co. and entered into beer distribution. Scott Beim, who, like Salzman is third generation, is still involved in the company, while his son Jake, 23 will be joining the company shortly. He is currently learning the beer ropes over at Brooklyn Brewery, mostly on the export end.

Salzman attended college in Burlington, VT in the '90s and was thus immersed in the neonatal craft brewing scene. When he came back to Peerless, he brought the enthusiasm back with him. He also brought Burlington-based Magic Hat.

Peerless began to add brands that made sense to them: Harpoon, Brooklyn and Ommegang (which led last year to Boulevard). More recently, local brands have been prominent: Captain Lawrence, based just across the Tappan Zee bridge in NY; Clown Shoes from Mass.; and NJ's 2-year-old Forgotten Boardwalk. Their most recent acquisition is Sweetwater Brewing from Atlanta, GA, which will launch in September.

Like many distributors who have embraced craft beer, it didn't take Peerless long to figure out that two of the keys are quality and education. Regarding the first item, working with Guinness really gave them a head start on draft quality. They employ eight draft specialists and are the only distributor to have received the Guinness draft quality award every year of its existence.

"Quality is really at the heart of the company," said Salzman.

Five years ago, Peerless brought in Brian Quinn to spearhead its craft beer division with an emphasis on education. The sales staff all has Cicerone level 1 training but outreach extends beyond Peerless to their customers — on- and off-premise retailers, their decision makers and staff. Quarterly training sessions and a "Lunch and Learn" series focus on topics like, So You Want To Be A Craft Bar? Draft Quality 101, and even non-beer areas like Social Media and Estate Planning.

"We focus on why it's important to sell great beer," said Quinn. "The interest is refreshing. It's also a necessity. As a wholesaler we feel good about what we're doing compare to the rest of the country."

Quinn jumped into the beer world while still in college, working as a summer intern with an Anheuser-Busch distributor; after he graduated he found a merchandising position with another Bud distributor, Northern Eagle. From there he transitioned to Labatt USA and then Interbrew. Working with brands like Stella Artois, Hoegaarden and Leffe, provided Quinn his chance to move into the world of specialty beers. He credits InBev, which took over Interbrew for providing him top-notch training opportunities. When InBev took over A-B Quinn saw the writing on the wall, and the timing was right for Peerless to bring him into their fold as their craft beer manager.

"It's amazing how far we've come in a few years," said Quinn. "(In Peerless' 7-county distribution area) the number of bars dedicated to craft and specialty beers has quadrupled over the last five years."

It's all about keeping the customer happy. "There's a lot more preselling now — talking in advance of what is coming down the pike. And we continue to hammer home the point — there's more to craft beer than just specialties. There's amazing beer year-round and selling just a few barrels a month can be a successful brand," Quinn said.

As more places take on craft — Quinn notes that in northern NJ, managers at some chains are becoming ever more receptive, and also have more freedom now to pour local and regional offerings. This ties in with expanding the demographic of craft. With soccer obviously very popular in Hispanic communities, events like the World Cup and Copa, provide opportunities "to bring craft beer to consumers who didn't traditionally drink it."

Quinn supplements his educational programs with a brewing school for Peerless staff, which includes brewing actual beer. He brings his own homebrew setup down to brew hands-on with the team.

"Homebrew changed the way I looked at beer," Quinn said. "It's like being in the kitchen versus watching a cooking show on TV."

Another area where Peerless provides team service is in helping retailers with events — tap takeovers, tastings and new product rollout. Liane Baly, who is in her second year at Peerless, works with customers to come up with event themes, signage and social media outreach. She also produces a monthly event calendar, a monthly in-house newsletter and sticky notes, or shelf talkers with individual beer descriptions for



The Peerless Beverage Co. team (from left) GM Marc Kramer, Marketing Manager Liane Baly, Vice President Chuck Salzman, VP of Sales Brian Lucas and Craft Beer Director Brian Quinn.

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Kim and Darcy Combine Names for Duvig Brewery

DuVig Brewing Co. in Branford has determined to brew session beers as a focus, and has carved quite a niche out for itself. The owners Darcy Dugas and Kim Vigliotti are enjoying the success of the brewery they opened just over a year ago.

Dan Vigliotti does the brewing with Scott Dugas, but Darcy and Kim are certainly active owners at the brewery. They are often pouring samples and filling growlers in the tasting area. When I visited recently, Kim and Darcy were washing out kegs and prepping them for filling and shipping to draft accounts. Both are prepared to do what it takes to get the beer out the door to waiting customers.

The brewery has been very successful and there are big plans for expansion in the near future. Recently, two more 6-bbl fermenters were added to the brewhouse. With the planned expansion into a neighboring unit in the industrial park, there will be a lot more room for the brewery. An expanded sitting and tasting area will be available and a licensing change will allow the sale of full pints to visitors to enjoy before buying a growler to take home.

All planned expansion is for the next 6 to 10 months and will bring in a new 10-bbl brewhouse, additional fermenters to top out at 80 barrels per month capacity. A larger cold room will mean more ability for lagers. Also look for a foray into bottles or cans to be available by the end of the calendar year. This will mean additional hires for the brewery and potentially more hours for the public to visit.

In addition to capacity some new styles are on the way for the DuVig crew. Look for an American



Kim Vigliotti and Darcy Dugas, the co-owners of Duvig Brewing Company in Branford, CT.

IPA of around 70 IBUs and 5.5% to be released during the expansion. This beer will still be on the edge of sessionable and has the team excited for a new beer. Finally, a release of 22-oz bottles of a Berliner Weisse aged in French cabernet sauvignon barrels is coming for your enjoyment. Stop by Branford to enjoy a session!

— Chris Sullivan

Distributor

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off-premise. There's a lot of passion with the people here," she said. "When they (the salesmen) get together in the morning," they're comparing notes, experiences, always talking beer."

Baly says it's important to deal with a brewery on an individual basis. For example with Captain Lawrence they came up with a specific initiative to highlight its local appeal. "Most people don't have a clue where Elmsford, NY is, so we developed a map that shows the brewery is only 20 miles from Bergen County, 50 miles from Morristown."

Said VP of Sales and Marketing

Brian Lucas, "People love doing events with us. We make it easy for them. We do it the right way for people just getting into it (craft). It's all part of managing a beer from the brewery to glass."

As far as brick and mortar, Peerless has expanded several times, first by adding on to its existing warehouse, then moving across the street. The warehouses are temperature controlled, one housing Peerless' domestic brands led by Miller, Coors and Yuengling as well as imports — Guinness, Heineken, Corona, etc. (Peerless also moves a large amount of PABs [Progressive Adult Beverages], featuring brands like Mike's Hard, Redd's, Twisted Tea and Smirnoff flavored drinks. A colder warehouse is reserved for craft beers and specialty imports like

Rodenbach and Boon Lambics.)

Peerless operates 65 trucks and makes more than 700 deliveries a day. The Ipad-equipped sales force e-mails orders in from the field; delivery is made, in most cases, the following day. Says General Manager, Marc Kramer if someone wants beer the same day, "We'll get it to them. Nobody ever runs out of beer!"

In Peerless' lobby, the wall displays a poster of men marching in Newark for the repeal of Prohibition holding placards that read, "We Want Beer!"

"I like to think my grandfather was among them," said Chuck Salzman. In the meantime, his father Richard (aka The Chairman), in his 80's, is still an active part of the business, displaying the passion that is the pride of Peerless. ♦♦♦

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