



Brewing in Ontario

A SHORT HISTORY OF A LONG TRADITION

In many ways the rise of the microbrewery in Ontario marks a return to a rich brewing tradition which traces its origins back to the founding of this province. Many of the craft beers we drink today are inspired by the beer styles brewed here in the past – and were enjoyed as much then as they are now.

The Brewing Tradition

The first English settlers, many of them Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution, began arriving in the late 1700s. They brought with them a love of good ale and found a climate and soil here which were ideally suited to the cultivation of barley. Long winters with little other work to do provided the time and the cooler temperatures necessary for brewing beer.

In pioneer times malt liquors were seen as a wholesome part of a healthy diet. With doctors few and far between, special brews were created with herbs and used as medicine. Beer was often safer than the local water and it was a part of any social gathering, whether at one of the many local taverns, or a barn raising. Every British soldier received beer, or beer money, as a part of his daily rations.

Thus the new province of Upper Canada provided excellent conditions for a beer brewing culture. And other factors came into play: since the transport of grain was not a simple matter, it was easier to brew beer and sell it. Along with numerous taverns around the province, the British Army provided a large - and thirsty - market. Lieutenant Governor John Simcoe actively encouraged the establishment of breweries to support the agricultural economy that was the backbone of the province - as well as ensuring that the local population drank locally produced beverages rather than the spirits that were popular in the United States.

The Rise of the Small Brewery

A discerning beer-drinking public encouraged excellence in brewing and breweries proliferated in the province: at its height, there were over 300 breweries in 130 towns across Ontario, according to beer historian Ian Bowering. To give but one example of the phenomenon: Yorkshire immigrant Thomas Carling started out as a farmer, but his brews were so popular that he was regularly invited to “stumping bees” to slake the thirst of his neighbours during the heavy work of clearing fields for planting. When new army barracks were established in London, Carling seized the opportunity, opened his own brewery, and became a part of Canadian beer lore.

As new waves of immigrants arrived, they brought their own varieties of beer into the mix. The English ales, favoured by the first settlers were augmented by Irish ales and porters. Then came the Germans with their lagers. Visitors to the province noted the variety and quality of the local brews.

From Temperance to Prohibition

Although the 1800s saw the rise of a strong Temperance Movement south of the border, the anti-alcohol lobby, which had strong religious overtones, was generally not well received in this province. Beer was a staple and in the

aftermath of the failed invasion of Canada (War of 1812), public sentiment was strongly opposed to anything “American.”

In the second half of the century the Temperance Movement went mainstream, now more associated with self-advancement and social improvement than with religion. The Temperance Act of 1878 gave towns and provincial governments the right to prohibit the sale of alcohol in their jurisdictions. By 1916, with First World War in full swing, all of the regional governments in Canada - with the exception of Quebec - had implemented the bans.

Prohibition, however, was never a clear-cut matter: the production of beer was not outlawed and many breweries continued to brew beer “for export.” Beer with reduced alcohol content (2.5 percent) was permitted, as was the use of beer for medicinal purposes - which frequently led to long line-ups at the doctor’s office in the Christmas season. Mail order operations sprang up where customers placed an order with an agent in Quebec or the United States who would forward payment to a local brewery where the customer could pick up his order: the out-of-province receipt made the transaction perfectly legal.

Even with its loopholes, and the opportunities for cross-border bootlegging into the dry states, the impact of Prohibition on the beer industry was not positive. After the war, as prohibition was repealed in one province after the other, the number of licensed breweries in Canada had been reduced from 118 to 72.

Consolidation in the Brewing Industry

20th century advances, such as electricity, refrigeration, and better, cheaper transportation made it easier to build larger breweries and supply larger areas. The growing popularity of lagers required more investment-intensive brewing: this worked against the smaller breweries. During the Depression it was much harder to raise capital and it was easy for wealthy businessmen, such as E.P. Taylor, to purchase rival breweries at bargain prices, often simply to close them down.

The advent of television in the 1950s, and the advertising age it brought, served to further strengthen national brands and by the 1970 only the giant breweries remained. Diversity was temporarily gone in Ontario, with the ale styles - the origin of brewing in this province - a notable casualty of the consolidation.

The Return of the Microbrewery

In the 1980s the quest for variety and quality saw an increase in imported beers. This, in turn led to a renewed interest in the beer drinking public and set the stage for the return of a the microbrewery, a phenomenon which was already taking root in parts of the United states. In 1984 the Brick Brewery was opened in Waterloo and the new age had begun. Today over 30 microbreweries are leading the revival of Ontario’s great brewing tradition with approximately 150 different varieties of all-natural, locally produced craft beers.

