

COVER STORY

THE CLAREMONT “COLLEGE OF CRAFT”

By Daniel Drennon



Natalie and Brian Seffer, Simon Brown and Emily Moultrie

Photo by Daniel Drennon

The Claremont Colleges are an American consortium of five undergraduate and two graduate schools of higher education located in Claremont, 35 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. I might add these are world class colleges.

Over the (college) course of the past five years, Simon Brown, himself an alum of a world class university based in New Haven, Connecticut that fittingly rhymes with ale, and his brewing partner Brian Seffer, have been providing the Claremont community with a master class in the art of craft brewing. Brown founded Claremont Craft Ales with his wife and business partner Emily Moultrie and they were subsequently joined by cousins Brian and Natalie Seffer.

Seffer now handles the majority of the brewing while Brown handles, well, everything else. I sat down with Brown, one of my favorite folks in the beer world, in one of my favorite tasting rooms in LA county, to assess the evolution of Claremont Craft Ales.

DRENNON: *You are five-plus years old, making you one of the oldest breweries in greater LA. What lessons have you learned?*

BROWN: That's a tough question to answer, because we've learned everything. It's shocking to think back and realize how little we actually knew about running a business or brewing professional-quality beer. I didn't understand how time-consuming and multi-layered the bureaucracy of running a brewery would be. ABC, TTB, FDA, CRV, EDD, BOE, IRS, FTB – the number of three-letter government agencies we have to deal with makes my head spin!

On the beer side, my greatest advice for new brewers is that quality matters. The marketplace is too crowded for anyone to be putting out sub-par beer. So, what this means practically is that you need to be super anal about your product and how it's produced: set up a lab, buy expensive test equipment, taste and evaluate every batch of beer at every step of the process, and most importantly, dump beer that doesn't put your best foot forward. And I suppose I should also add: learn what good beer is! That may sound silly, but my palate has grown a lot over the last five years when it comes to detecting off-flavors and evaluating beer flavor. In one regard, I didn't have enough beer-drinking experience five years ago to know whether the beer we were

putting out was flawed or not. I'm fortunate to have a brewing partner in Brian that has a strong palate and commitment to quality!

You and Brian were homebrewers. For many years, I said it was a risky gamble for homebrewers to jump straight into their own (professional) brewery without gaining some experience in a pro brewery first. I have since retracted that opinion because so many of you have made that jump successfully. How did you pull it off and what would your advice be to homebrewers who want to make that leap?

Yes, I agree that professional brewing experience (or schooling) is not necessary to open a brewery, but it is increasingly helpful as the market gets more crowded. Back when we opened, we were one of only two breweries in a 25-mile radius, and the general LA public was just starting their love affair with craft beer, so we could get away with a lot when it came to the quality of the beer. That's not true anymore: the beer must be good to get people into your tasting room. Our brewing team is continually working to improve our beer quality.

My advice to homebrewers-going-pro is that if you want to accelerate your growth and gain market acceptance outside your tasting room, then yes, you should learn how a successful professional brewery operates. That doesn't necessarily mean working in a brewery, but at least having a successful pro-brewer that you can get advice from. This is still a very cooperative and collegial group, so it's not hard to find someone who will coach you. We have provided personal advice to dozens of new breweries over the last five years.

You have grown from a three-barrel system on opening day to a 15-barrel system now. How have you orchestrated the growth of Claremont Craft Ales? What role does planning play?

We have a specific strategy when it comes to growth: slow and steady wins the race. In other words, it's all about deliberate, sustainable growth, as opposed to using huge injections of cash to flood the market with product and hoping the demand builds to meet that supply. That also means that the physical brewery grows very slowly. We started with a small and cheap brew system, a crappy homebrew-style mill, and a

joke of a glycol system. But that allowed us to generate revenue quickly and reinvest it back into the business over the last five years to slowly build the awesome brewing operation we have now. If we had started the brewery with the same equipment we have now, we would have needed a lot of investment dollars or debt, and that's a level of risk that we were not comfortable with. So now we are a mature good-sized brewery with no outside investors and zero debt – we wouldn't have it any other way!

Where do you see yourselves in ten years? Do you plan to expand? Do you have an end game?

No, we do not have an end game. Even though we are all about slow and measured growth, I have no upper limit to my ambition. I will never stop trying to expand our brand, improve the beer, learn new things, etc. We like to be challenged and like to move forward, albeit at our own pace and on our terms. Hopefully in ten years our brand will still be going strong and available in multiple states. Our reach outside of LA is growing every day, and hopefully that continues at a greater rate for years to come.

We talked in your very cool tasting room, located in the very cool Claremont Colleges community, about the proliferation of breweries and losing beer fans who tend to explore. What are the pros of going from seven to seventy breweries in Los Angeles County over the last six years? And what are the cons?

As you said, craft beer fans are a curious bunch who love to experiment and try new flavors. So yes, as more and more breweries open in the area, our customers will spend more of their time elsewhere. I think our quality is strong enough that we won't lose those customers permanently, but now they'll be spending some percentage of their beer-drinking-time at other breweries, instead of 100% at our brewery, like they did a few years ago. So that's the con ... a loss of some tasting room revenue. But the pros far outweigh this cost. More craft breweries translate into a greater overall awareness of craft beer, greater demand for local beer, and hopefully less demand for corporate beer. Plus, the community of brewers is invaluable! The rise of the LA Brewers Guild has been such a boon for LA brewers – from industry promotion to collaborative problem solving, it's an amazing resource!

I always say that if you worry about brewing world class beer, building a loyal local fan base, and being smart about growth, your brewery will survive any critical mass implosion on the horizon. Agree or disagree?

Agree 100%. I think you just summarized all of my points from above! In an increasingly crowded market, you absolutely must make top-quality beer and be very thoughtful about how you spend your money. Carelessness on either of these fronts will put you at risk of getting squeezed out as the market gets more saturated. We talked about the haze craze. I had your 35 Miles NE IPA and it was delicious. You eloquently expressed your take on the decision to make your foray into hazies, the artistic challenge, and how they relate to West Coast style IPAs. Please expound upon your assessment for our readers.

Despite urgings from Brian and our sales team, I was very hesitant to jump on the hazy IPA bandwagon, and so we were very late to the party. Basically, I did not agree with intentionally making a cloudy beer just for the sake of appearance. I've never been hung up on beer clarity (we don't filter any of our beers), but I think that the characteristics of a beer should be driven exclusively by flavor and aroma. Make the best tasting beer that you can, and if it happens to be cloudy or brilliantly clear, so be it. But for the love of God, do not artificially cloud up a beer just to satisfy a trend! Having said that though, I now realize that I didn't understand the style. I was having a knee-jerk reaction to the hype. Once Brian educated me on the technical challenges of the style, I was intrigued. Hop flavor and aroma have always been my favorite aspects of a good beer, and so I appreciated the innovation of the Northeast IPA – maximizing hop flavor while keeping bitterness as low as possible, and really thinking outside the box in terms of brewing process. I don't think brewers should be tied down by tradition, and the greatest trait of the American craft brewing industry is its spirit of innovation, so the new processes required by this style were exciting to me: zero hops added on the hot side, dry-hopping at the height of fermentation, etc. ... it's all so crazy, but it works! It also helps that Brian created an amazing beer. I guess I'm a convert now.

You just won a bronze medal at the 2017 Great American Beer Festival for one of your flagship beers, the Jacaranda Rye IPA. Do you get validation from that and how much importance do you place on competitions?

Winning that medal was so surreal and awesome! It was surprising and heart-warming how many people pay attention to GABF. The congratulations came from such a wide range of people ... it definitely felt validating. It's a high point of the last five years for sure! At the same time, we recognize what a crapshoot it is – tasting beer is so subjective! So, we don't get hung up on competitions, but it certainly doesn't hurt to win!



Cheers to local beer!

Photo by Daniel Drennon

Building and establishing a successful brewery in a state with 800 breweries is no mean feat. Do you think talent or work ethic is more important to achieving that success?

Work ethic for sure! Honestly, making beer is not hard. If you can follow a recipe, you can make beer, and most of the time, that beer will be good. But to be a successful brewery, you need to be good at business and marketing and human resources. You need to be meticulous and detail-oriented and focused on quality. You need to be disciplined with your money and your time. Don't get me wrong, talent is important and will help set you apart from the crowd (and I feel fortunate to have the talent that we do), but first and foremost, a brewery is a business.

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

Deliberate.

