

BY KENDALL JONES



Bellingham by Way of Beer

Our Washington Beer Guru Digs into the Burgeoning Scene

Despite its reputation as a laid-back, Birkenstocks-wearing hippie town, Bellingham, Washington, is a forward-thinking, tech-savvy, growing community. It's big enough for some hustle and bustle, but small enough that everyone seems to know each other. An hour south of Vancouver, British Columbia, and 90 minutes north of Seattle, it is both off the grid and right at the center of it. Comfortably relaxed in its own skin, Bellingham is artistic and shrewd, altruistic and commercial, enjoying its anonymity while striving for recognition.

There's no better manifestation of this duality than the unbridled growth of the city's libations industry. Today the "City of Subdued Excitement" is home to 14 breweries, four cideries and two distilleries, most of which opened in the last five years. All are committed to artisanship, but steadfastly bent on success.



Since 1995 **BOUNDARY BAY BREWERY AND BISTRO** has anchored the local beer scene and remains a cornerstone of the community. It was the lone voice in the wilderness until 2008 when **CHUCKANUT BREWERY AND KITCHEN** opened for business. A few years later in 2012, **KULSHAN BREWING** became the city's third brewery. Since then things have snowballed, with fledgling breweries like **STRUCTURES**, **TWIN SISTERS** and **STONE'S THROW** opening within just the last four years and garnering enough buzz to bring Seattleites north to savor suds. No one seems worried about oversaturation just yet, because this community of approximately 90,000 is uncommonly eager to support its hometown breweries.

"We've lived and traveled all over the world, but this is a very special place," says Mari Kemper, who moved to Bellingham with her husband, legendary beer industry guru Will Kemper, one year before the couple opened Chuckanut. Among other things, she points to Bellingham's strong sense of community as a key to the brewery's success. "People here are protective; they're dedicated to the local community and support local manufacturing and agriculture."

Terms like *shop local*, *maker culture* and *sustainability* may be trendy buzzwords these days, but those ideas are nothing new in Bellingham. They are also some of craft beer's most attractive attributes. So it's not surprising that Bellinghamsters wholly embrace their hometown breweries.

"Around here if you go into a grocery store, restaurant or bar, you're going to see a lot of local, Bellingham-brewed beer. Our local consumers like knowing where it came from, who made it and what went into it," says Chad Kuehl of Wander Brewing.



BELLINGHAM DRINKS

At any of the city's breweries or tap houses, pick up a copy of the Bellingham Tap Trail Passport, your guide to the local beer scene. Be sure to check out these other notable makers.

BELLINGHAM CIDER CO.
» bellinghamcider.com

CHUCKANUT BAY DISTILLERY
» chuckanutbaydistillery.com

GRUFF BREWING
» gruff-brewing.com

HERB'S CIDER
» herbscider.com

HONEY MOON MEAD AND CIDER
» honeymoonmeads.com

ILLUMINATI BREWING
» illuminatibrewing.com

LOST GIANTS CIDER
» lostgiantscider.com

MENACE BREWING
» menace-industries.com/brewery

MOUNT BAKER DISTILLERY
» mountbakerdistillery.com



with the brewery: People know me and Colleen and our employees, not just our beers and brewery," he says. "If you live in Bellingham, it's likely you know someone who works at one of the breweries."

Fierce hometown loyalty is great, but when it comes to beer, is such a hyper-local focus a flaw? After all, there's a whole beer cosmos out there to explore. In truth, local beer is abundant around Bellingham, but it is not ubiquitous. Local bottleshops and bars do make efforts to keep local beer drinkers connected to the outside world. For example, **ELIZABETH STATION** owner Patrick McEvoy is notorious for sourcing beers from farther afield, some of which require road tripping hundreds of miles to get it at the source.

Of Bellingham's breweries, a few are familiar to outsiders. Boundary Bay and Chuckanut have well-established regional and national reputations, while Kulshan Brewing and **ASLAN BREWING COMPANY** have done an impressive job of distributing their beers across the region (the latter even opening a second location in Seattle later this fall). But for the most part, beer lovers need to journey to Bellingham to experience what the city has to offer. Even those larger breweries create a lot of beer that never makes it beyond city limits and are worth the adventure to Whatcom County. ●