

San Diego Beer Week distinguishes local scene

Neal Turnage, Special for USA TODAY 9:49 a.m. EST November 21, 2013



(Photo: Neal Turnage)

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Three years ago [Mike Hess](#), a former financial planner whose clients included uber San Diego craft brewery [Stone Brewing Company](#), decided to take a leap into the world of San Diego craft beer. Tonight he was presiding over a five-course [San Diego Beer Week](#) tasting dinner at the beachy chic [Paradise Point](#) resort's Baleen restaurant along with chef Amy DiBiase.

Add one more to the list of San Diego craft beer overnight sensations.

Hess's [Grazias Vienna Cream Ale](#) (a mash-up of Austria's second largest city Graz and the Spanish word for "thank you") might be a new kid on the block, but its innovative, malt forward, Nibble hops balanced taste and creamy smooth texture was an instant Beer Week hit -- and a tasty snapshot of San Diego's take-it-or-leave-it craft beer culture. (It didn't hurt that DiBiase paired it with her cocoa nib crusted venison carpaccio.)

Upstart beginnings, daring brews, (think incipient must try [Karl Strauss's Peanut Butter Cup Porter](#)) and out-of-the-six-pack food pairings now define San Diego's craft beer scene and set it apart from competitor cities such as Portland.

Craft breweries in San Diego have doubled within two years (currently around 78). As [Ballast Point](#) specialty brewer Colby Chandler points out, "Portland may have the largest number of breweries per city, but San Diego has the largest number per county." (Statistics indicate craft beer has a \$330 million impact on San Diego's economy.)

Word is out about the quality and conviviality that surround San Diego craft beer. Which is why people from the EU, Asia and all points in between now flock to San Diego Beer Week.

It's also why Ballast Point's spanking new Little Italy brewpub is packed in the middle of the day. And why Stone's elaborate and also new [Liberty Station](#) restaurant, (which at 23,000-square-feet is San Diego's largest), is jammed on a Friday evening -- and Karl Strauss's delightful Sorrento Valley brew grotto garden restaurant is swarmed for Sunday brunch.

They're all there for good food (organic, high end bistro -- Ballast Point's chef Colin MacLaggan is [Le Cordon Bleu](#) trained) and to share in the collaborative spirit that brands San Diego craft beer.

The "if someone runs out of hops they'll call us and we'll say 'come on over, we'll give you some, and have a beer too'" philosophy that Karl Strauss brew master Paul Segura describes was born out of San Diego's eclectic home brew culture. Initiated in '87 in reaction to a 34-year local craft brew production drought when beer conglomerates reigned, that collaborative effort has been refortified and now extends internationally.

Chandler reports that Ballast Point, who along with other local breweries regularly stages "tap takeovers" all over the world, recently produced 1,200 casks of their hit hoppy [Even Keel](#) beer for Witherspoon Pubs throughout the UK. Stone, Karl Strauss, Lost Abbey and other local breweries have also begun to extend internationally in Australia, Japan and Sweden amongst others.

Still, says Chris Cochran, who spearheads Stone's marketing efforts, San Diego's resonance as a craft beer capital is rooted in the local's true embracement of the movement. "Most of the breweries encourage or have programs that encourage employees to come up with their own brew that's then bottled and sold. People embrace difference and diversity in beer here."

Must tastes:

Ballast Point: Indra Kunnidra curry export stout. A burst of Madras curry, cumin, cayenne, coconut, and Kaffir lime leaf in India style stout.

Lost Abbey: [Merry Taj IPA](#), extra hoppy, holiday beer with tropical fruit and addictive spicy bitterness.

[Pizza Port](#) (throughout San Diego): pizza made to order with house made wholegrain craft beer crust.

[Pubcakes](#): Local craft beer infused cupcakes.

Stone Brewing: [Suede Imperial Porter](#). A collaboration with Oregon's 10 Barrel Brewing, with harvested avocado, honey, jasmine and calendula flowers.

Must do's:

"Bottle and Kegged," [An Exhibition](#) on why and how San Diego became a craft beer capital.

A post beer spa treatment with foraged local botanicals at [San Diego's premier spa](#).

Recommended San Diego Craft Beer Tours:

[Brew Hop Tours](#)

[Brewery Tours of San Diego](#)

[San Diego Beer & Wine Tours](#)