

# Is Baltimore a Beer Town?

by Thomas Cizauskas ©2003

[Mid-Atlantic Brewing News](#), Vol 5,#3, p.6, May 2003.

## **Baltimore was once a thriving beer town. Could it be one again?**

When it comes to beer, Baltimore's 650 thousand or so residents can't be wrong. In the greater metropolitan area of Baltimore, 1.8 million barrels of beer are consumed yearly. That's 595,188,000 bottles of beer on the wall.

But does that mean Baltimore is a beer town? The answer depends upon whom you're talking to.

Frank Griffin, Draft Manager of National Distributing, has seen the beers come and go. He began his career with National Brewing Company, of Natty Boh fame, in 1955. He wistfully remembers the nearly 30 breweries during his youth in Baltimore City alone. "Baltimore had a brewery in every neighborhood then," he says. Names like Gunther, Arrow, American, Brehms, and even south Baltimore's Hals and Pabst.

Jerry Hoffberger, then owner of the Orioles, was owner of the National Brewing Company. That leverage and a clever television campaign, featuring his iconic one-eyed man cartoon mascot, rocketed Natty Boh to undisputed local dominance. Nearly three out of every four drinkers drank National Bohemian, arguably the largest percentage ever for any one beer in any major US city. Griffin observes, "If you drank Bud, you were from out of town."

Ray Klimovitz is the Technical Director for the [Master Brewers Association of America](#). He worked at the National Brewery from 1961 until the end of 1976 when he left for Schlitz in Milwaukee. He initially answers the question "Is Baltimore a "Beertown? Well, it used to be."

"In 1965, there were still five breweries in Baltimore and two in Cumberland," Klimovitz says. "I fondly remember the brewmasters at those breweries at the time: Pete Marcher at National, Paul Glomp at Schaefer, Ray Klussman from American, Ray Bleckaz from Carling, Otto Noisinger from Queen City and my old buddy, Joe Plewacki (assistant brewmaster at Schaefer). I liked especially going to the American Brewery on Gay Street; they had an enclosed courtyard with picnic tables and a barbecue spit, along with the cold beer!

He contrasts those "good ol' days" with Baltimore today. "We had some good beers back then in the 'Land of Pleasant Living'. We brewed lots of good old "American Lager Beer". At times we could actually brew some Bock Beer in January and February, when we 'cleaned out the vats' as our customers in Highlandtown and Canton used to say! But we didn't have the freedom that today's small brewers have in brewing a lot of beer styles.

## **National shuts the spigots**

Carling built its Halethorpe plant in 1961. Annual capacity was about 1 million barrels. Carling Brewing Company (a division of Carling-O'Keefe of Canada) bought the National Brewing Co. in 1974 and rechristened the company Carling-National Breweries. It closed the Highlandtown brewery at Dillon and Conkling Streets brewery soon afterward and moved all of the production to the new Halethorpe facility.

The efforts may have been insufficient. Carling-O'Keefe sold its U.S. subsidiary to G. Heileman in the 1970s.

Rather than investing in modernization, G. Heilemann chose to jury-rig the kettle by welding on raised sides. Production capability rose to close to 2 million barrels per year.

Stroh's bought G. Heileman in 1996 and closed the Halethorpe brewery shortly thereafter.

The 80+ missile silo-like outside fermenters were installed in the late 1970s. Each standing nearly four-stories tall, they were state of the art at the time. Their large capacity and their exposure to direct sunlight and the outdoor elements demanded creative solutions for refrigeration, insulation, and convection control. In the summer of 1998, they were laid on their sides in the parking lot behind the brewery and sold as scrap.

The brewhouse vessels were still visible from the Baltimore Beltway, I-695, as late as 2006, unused by the last tenant, Washington Flour. When first fabricated, each vessel had a capacity of 610 barrels (almost 19,000 gallons or 8,405 cases). In 2006, the building was razed for development. The vessels were sold as stainless scrap.

Products brewed at the Halethorpe brewery included Natty Boh (National Bohemian), National Premium, Tuborg, Colt 45, Strohs, and Arizona Ice Tea(!). Beer did return to the Dillon Street brewery briefly in the mid 1990s. A small section of the bottling plant was partitioned off and used by Marc Tewey for his Brimstone Brewery. Scottish beer importer [Legends, Ltd.](#) used an adjacent space as its warehouse until 2004. The Dillon Street Natty Boh brewery complex, standing high on a bluff overlooking Baltimore's harbor, is now a rebuilt warren of offices, condominiums, and storage units. An illuminated Natty Boh manis perched atop of the old building, overlooking Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

## **A New Generation**

Volker Stewart is one of the newer generation. He is the owner of Brewers Art, an upscale midtown Baltimore restaurant and brewpub. Amongst the bottled beers of Belgium, other European and American micros he sells to complement his delicious Belgian-styled house-brews, he also sees nostalgia for Natty Boh.

But Stewart is quick to point out that his "clientele is very knowledgeable about good beer". It is the availability of a vast diversity of better beers, regional, national, and international, that to him, "reflects and nourishes a thriving beer culture in Baltimore."

Nostalgia of a more recent vintage has developed for some of Maryland and Baltimore's craft breweries. One local brewer fondly remembers the early 90s when he would visit at least once a year from the Midwest to enjoy the Pils and other beers of the Baltimore Brewing Company.

Another, Rick Kennedy was the brewer for Marc Tewey's now closed Brimstone Brewery in Baltimore's Highlandtown district. He reminisces.

"It was mid July of 93' and boy o' boy, I could see what was happening. Beer was becoming more intriguing to the general public. [Sisson's](#) was popular, Baltimore Brewing Company, Wild Goose on the Eastern Shore-- always a pit stop on the way to Ocean City, Oliver's, Brimstone, Oxford, Blue Ridge. Even to this day I am amazed at the unity of all the small brewers. Each one had a niche. Retailers were supportive, the press gave it attention. Consumers were into it, life was grand. Meanwhile bars began opening up for beer lovers to go or be seen: [Wild Mushroom](#), Gypsy's, Racers, Max's. I remember that Belgian beers seemed to explode into the area. In each part of town good beer was available. That wouldn't last for long though. Brand loyalty to your local beer was tough to get if not impossible. Still is to this day in my opinion."

## 'Golden' Pubs

Joe Gold, who once worked for Young's Brewery in London, has been a tireless promoter and maven of good beer in Baltimore since the mid 1980s. "Baltimore is a beer town", he exclaims, with a mixture of paternalistic pride and certainty of fact, "It always has been." He explains that as a port town, Baltimore was intrinsically linked to beer. As a blue collar town, beer became a beverage for everyday life. "Beer was our language."

Gold credits the beer savvy and dedication of the city's publicans as holding great promise for Baltimore's future as a beer town. "Folks like John Fleurie of Dudas" are zealots in their promotion of good beer.

Others single out Bertha's, Racer's, Mick Kipp at Pickles Pub, Ken Krucenski of Sean Bolan's, the Thirsty Dog in Federal Hill, John Stevens Restaurant (for the food and beer), and Bob Simko and Casey Hard of Max's on Broadway.

Ken Krucenski of Federal Hill's Sean Bolan's Irish Pub beams when he talks about his taps and his cask ales. His strong conviction that Baltimore is a beer town led him and his partners to replace his only two taps (of American light beer) when they purchased the pub three years ago with 20+ taps of local craft beers and high quality (and high cost) Belgian and other imports. He measures success by the patronage of beer aficionados who visit often from out-of-state and locals pleased with his good food and good beer. Independently of each other, both Krucenski and Gold praise the other for being a vital linchpin in Baltimore's beer culture.

Referring to Max's on Broadway, one local brewer said that this multi-tap bar located on the waterfront in the Fells Point neighborhood alone "would single-handedly qualify Baltimore as a beer town".

Managers Simko and Hard proudly display their 100+ taps, 300+ bottles, and newly installed hand pump for cask-conditioned ales. They tell of Max's original mission to pour every local and regional brand and how that mission has been expanded to include a "pan-stylistic" panoply of imported beers from "Xingu to Singha".

Both nod their heads in agreement that Baltimore itself is "most definitely a beer town, bigger and better than even five years ago." They point to the numerous beer festivals, to the important role played by the tourist trade, to the presence of returning military with their thirst for beers from overseas, to Baltimore's, to the greater selection than ever before in local bars and shops.

But Hard and Simko have also noticed a burgeoning hometown pride, especially with newer residents. Pointing to two prominent tap handles, they exclaim, "Brewer's Art Resurrection Ale has become a local cult beer among the newcomers." and "Clipper City is on fire!"

Both believe that local quality and a growing beer sophistication and demand from Baltimore residents have encouraged Baltimore retail shops to expand their selections as well.

And expand they have.

## **Retailers regale**

Joe Falcone of Wells Liquors notes that he stocks over 140 varieties of Belgian beers, and 1100 varieties of beer overall. It's not only beer drinkers who are demanding more choice, he says. "Baltimore's wine drinkers are experimenting with better beers as well".

Manager Tim Hillman of the Wine Source notes a similar trend. He has seen a 15 % increase annually in his better beer sales for at least five years. "People are eating better, he says. " And drinking better beer is a natural complement to that." "Folks in Baltimore have grown up with an affinity for beer," Hillman continues. He sees the new loyalty toward good beer in general as "demonstrating Baltimore's increasingly discerning collective palate." Local restaurants have responded by placing better beers on their menus. But Hillman acknowledges that while some of the increase in sales is due to converts from national brands and some to a large international clientele, a large portion is due to a younger demographic.

John Pollack, beer buyer for the Old Vine agrees: "The younger drinkers are buying more of the beer, but as they spoil their palates, they'll remain with the better beer as they grow up." Pollack continues, "If you define beer culture as a segment that is motivated by the taste of beer, then one could say that there are enclaves of beer culture sprinkled throughout Baltimore. The overall beer scene is better now than a few years ago because the trend followers have fallen away leaving the stronger beers and breweries." He finishes with a personal touch: "At our store, we are passionate about beer. We take home what we sell and vice versa."

Les Sunderland of Maryland wholesaler DOPS concurs. "Quality rises to the top and makes a statement as to who you are." He is certain that the "vigorous beer scene" in Baltimore is here to stay. "We are just on the edge of the curve."

## **Pale Blue Society**

Patrick and Sherri Casey own Legends, Ltd., an importer and distributor in Maryland. They add another reason why Baltimore is a strong beer town. Current Maryland law protects the smaller beer, wine, and liquor shops against the incursion of large and national chain stores. Without this protection, the small producers and suppliers of better beers would be squeezed out. Selection would suffer, they say.

Sherri Casey mentions the strong neighborhoods of Baltimore as crucial to local pride and hence potentially strong beer culture. "Baltimore may have been a blue collar town when I grew up here", adds Patrick Casey, "but now it's a 'pale blue' society." He explains that an influx of the "mobile society", of the financial, high-tech, and medical professions, has added to the city's demographics. Residents are traveling more and demanding better beers when they return. As a result, Legends has seen a real increase in the sales of better beers. And 40% of those increases, they state, have occurred in Baltimore City and its environs.

## **Local Perspective**

Well-traveled Baltimorean and good beer lover, Duane Gerushat, opines that for a city of its size, Baltimore has a vital beer culture. "The nice thing is that you can get styles and the well defined edges of these styles-- a true pils or doppelbock at Baltimore Brewing, a nice Belgian at Brewers Art, a classic bitter at Wharf Rat." He continues, "As corporate America takes over the brewing scene we are losing the individuality that could be found 10 years ago. Fortunately for those of us who drink in Balmer, the brewpubs have maintained a unique edge -- perhaps we're behind the times -- but that's just fine!"

Historian and beer logger Alexander Mitchell IV gives Baltimore the nod over Philadelphia. "It's one of the few places I've ever seen I would tell someone to book a room and hire a designated driver or use the Metro. The places in Chicago, Philly, etc. are too spread out to be effective with too many terrific places stuck way out in the suburbs." He continues, "The beer scene here is definitely maturing, but then it is everywhere else too. We lost some crap and some jewels, but the fact that we have five in-city brewpubs and several more on the outskirts still alive, plus beer bars staying beer bars which is more than I can say of some bigger places like Philly, speaks well for this place."

## **The Future**

But will Baltimore become a brand loyal beer town again? Joe Gold worries that the very access to better beer from everywhere else acts to hinder support for a new generation of local beers. Pollack of the Old Vine believes that brand loyalty and local manufacture are not necessarily a feature of a beer culture-- although they can be.

Baltimore beer pioneer and [Clipper City Brewing Company](#) owner Hugh Sisson flat out rejects the notion that "brand loyalty has anything to with defining a town as a beer town." He references a survey that demonstrated that even consumers of Anheuser-Busch products only purchase AB beers 50% of the time.

## Stand By Your Beer Brand

There are folks who, like the beer slogan recently appropriated by Mayor Martin O'Malley for Baltimore, do "believe" Baltimore will be a beer town already. And others believe it may already be.

Take for example, Bo Lenk, a member of the Cross Street Irregulars, a Baltimore homebrew club. With great pride he states: "In Baltimore, we have a symbiotic relationship with our breweries whereas the city to our south is a town of itinerant drinkers."

[Ron Kodlick](#) is the president of the only US branch of Britain's [Society for Preservation of Beers from the Wood](#), a consumers' rights group for cask-conditioned ale. He defiantly expresses satisfaction for Baltimore's current sudsy state: "I don't need to go anywhere else for beer."

The National Brewing Company no longer exists and Natty Boh is brewed out-of-state. But National Distributing's Frank Griffin sees hope for the resurgence of local brands in the high volume of sales, drinkers, and per capita consumption in Baltimore (23.2 gallons per year). "Maryland and Baltimore recently opened their arms for Yuengling. Maybe the timing is right for the new locals like Degroens and Clipper City."

Andy Tveekrem is brewmaster at Maryland's Frederick Brewing Company: "Wild Goose is starting to get a reputation as a beer of consistent quality and good flavor." It remains an uphill battle, Tveekrem says, because "people don't cherish immediacy like they do the bliss of nostalgia." Or could one say a Goose in the hand is worth (much more) than three in the Busch?

Take, for example, DeGroens Beer of the Inner Harbor which proudly carries the trade name of the Baltimore Brewing Company.

... or Wayne Mahaffey, the owner of a new eponymous bar which lies in the working class neighborhood of Canton. It's an irony, he observes as he sweeps and mops before opening recently. The longtime residents prefer the out-of-state national brands. It's the 'newbies' who prefer the craft beers on draft. "You have to have a passion for it" - which he does - and believes that beer town Baltimore will support his venture.

"Is Baltimore a beer town?" Sisson of Clipper City muses again. "If it's defined by craft and import sales, then Baltimore is at or above the national average of 3.75% craft beer and 9% imported beer, even if our rate is not as elevated as Portland's or towns' in Colorado." But, he concludes, from the standpoint of product availability and total beer sales, and in the context of the Baltimore/Washington DC corridor, Baltimore is one of the top 5 markets in the nation.

And even though Sisson doesn't find brand loyalty as a necessary aspect of a beer culture, he is banking on it with his "Old Baltimore Style" McHenry Lager. "We see commercials that say: 'It's all about the beer.'", he says. "Well, they should say: 'It's all about Baltimore.'"

Hon.