

MICHIGAN'S HOLY HOPS



The Great Lakes Beer Bible

By Rick Sigsby

PREFACE

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Beer was already an important part of society by the time the written language appeared on Babylonian tablets around 4,000 BC. It kept the workers content while building the pyramids during the days of the Pharaohs in Egypt. In North America, the native Indians practiced the art of brewing and even our founding fathers including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were brew masters.

Here in Michigan, the brewing industry dates back to the 1830's, years prior to statehood, and now we rank 5th in the nation in numbers of breweries. In 1991 there were three breweries in the state and through 2014 the number is somewhere north of 160. According to the Brewers Assoc., the brewing industry contributes nearly 12,000 full-time jobs and over \$1 billion to the economy.

It's true Martin Luther said, 'Beer was made by men, wine by God.' But it was another founding father, Benjamin Franklin, who said, 'Beer is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.'

With the success of *MICHIGAN'S HOLY WATER: The Great Lakes Wine Bible*, it seems only natural with the booming success of the beer brewing industry that an alcohol sequel should be named *MICHIGAN'S HOLY HOPS: The Great Lakes Beer Bible*.

Statistically, 9 out of 10 brewery owners got their start as home brewers. In 2015, Michigan will become only the fourth state to offer brewing education, with a fermentation science program at Central Michigan University. Michigan breweries are not just winning local craft brewing contests, they are grabbing gold medals at the Great American Beer Festival and the World Beer Cup, competing against the best brewers in the world. Even one of the state's micro-brewing meccas, Grand Rapids, has captured the title of Beer City USA.

This book offers brewery owners and brew masters an opportunity to tell their stories. It is not meant to create brewing experts but rather craft beer enthusiasts with an insider's look at why every resident and every tourist should never pass up an opportunity to visit a brewery tasting room.

Beer is not the answer. Beer is the question. 'YES' is the answer. And people are saying 'YES' to Michigan beer.

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The following is an example of the interviews in Rick's newest book.

THIS HALFPENNY IS PRICELESS

If there is a Mount Rushmore of Michigan craft beer, in this case Mount Beermore, Rex Halfpenny's mug would be up there etched in granite. No doubt, as a much sought after national judge for beer tasting competitions, Rex is one of the most knowledgeable experts on craft beer.

A native of the territory of Hawaii (pre-statehood), he grew up with an international mix. But upon reaching legal drinking age (or maybe a little before), Rex discovered what most beer drinkers learned in the 1960s and 70s. "I enjoyed a wide variety of beers back then," said Halfpenny. "But I also quickly realized they were the same - all golden, all 5% or less alcohol, all versions of international lager beer."

When business took him to the mainland near the Bay Area of California, he discovered a true stylistic diversity in beer. "In 1982, I began a love affair with craft beer," he said. Another love Rex discovered in 1976, prior to leaving Hawaii was his future wife Mary. "We met at a Pink Floyd movie on a university campus and she reprimanded me for not paying enough attention to her. Long story short, I got her number, mustered up the courage to call her a week later, which led to marriage and she's been my editor ever since (laughing)."

Another discovery in California was a book called Michael Jackson's Beer Companion. Jackson had a five-star rating system and Halfpenny set out to drink all of them. "I drank a lot of crap but along the way I learned beer style diversity and that sent me on a path chasing beer all over the country," said Rex.

His employer transferred him to Seattle at a time when the Northwest was in the midst of a craft beer explosion. In 1988, the Halfpenny's moved to Michigan - ironically, they settled an hour from where Mary was born and raised in Detroit.

By 1997, Rex grew tired of the corporate world and needed a change. As a witness to the emerging craft beer market in the state, that change was the development of the Michigan Brewers Guild, the legalization of homebrewing in Michigan and his creation of the Michigan Beer Guide bi-monthly publication.

How quickly time flies when you're busy writing, judging, speaking and drinking craft beers. Rex Halfpenny is easily one of the most recognized faces at beer festivals all around the Midwest. He is Michigan's biggest promoter with the mantra - Drink Michigan Beer!

Interview with Rex Halfpenny:

How did the Brewers Guild get started?

Rex: There were approx. 30 brewers in the state at the time but it wasn't a cohesive group, more adversarial. They wouldn't even talk to each other. They wouldn't even agree to meet at a place that served a competitor's beer. So we met at a Bud dive bar in Saginaw. The only thing they would agree on was "I want to sell my own beer." So the guild started as a marketing tool to promote Michigan beer.

Now they all believe in “a rising tide raises all ships.” They work well together with a healthy exchange of information. Out of necessity, the guild is now much more like a political action committee.

There is a beer festival practically every weekend, the year-round. You were instrumental in starting the first.

Rex: I saw the success of the guilds and their festivals out West, so I started the first one in Livonia. We had 600 people show up to drink Michigan beers exclusively. Now it’s 10,000 people and a sold-out event. And yes, there seem to be festivals every week.

Give me your thumbnail sketch of the history of beer.

Rex: Back when we were hunter/gatherers, alcohol was discovered - probably a mead fermented naturally. Grains were grown - not for bread but rather beer. So I maintain, the civilization of Man should be attributed to beer. Once the nomads began to settle, beer was safer to drink than the water. Not only that, but factoring in the nutritional values, beer was the first multi-vitamin. Because of beer, Mankind has grown and prospered.

You are a certified beer judge. How does that happen?

Rex: To become a judge you study hard, pay some money and take a big test. A decent score (50%) gets you into an apprenticeship program. A good score (60%) gets you certified, with an 80% score you can judge nationally, 90% makes you a Master Judge. The Beer Judge Certification Program (BJC P) also tracks your performance as a judge - you have to get real world experience, which is scored and provides a ranking.

Is judging wine and beer similar?

Rex: Like judging wine, we depend on sniffing. Unlike wine, we don’t spit, we swallow to get the full impact of the beer. The biggest difference in BJC P judging is the beers are not presented in numerical order. That is each beer has a number but are presented in different order. For example, 417 might be my first beer and your tenth beer. That helps eliminate “first/last” bias. Everyone remembers the first beer you drink and the last beer, while everything else is a blur.

What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned in judging?

Rex: Aroma, aroma, aroma. Some people smell better than others but as we get older our senses get duller. But we can re-educate our noses to be receptive to the smells of the world around us.

There are wines, beers and spirits - where do mead and cider fit in?

Rex: They should be considered legitimately as separate categories but in Michigan they are considered wines. In the case of cider, it makes sense because the definition of wine is fermented fruit - cider is fermented apples. Mead is not fermented grain, which is beer and it's not made from fruit but rather from honey. It has to fit in the category so Michigan puts it in with wines. You need a winemaker's license to make mead or cider. A brewery can't make either without a winemaker's license. But now there is a lot of crossover with many businesses getting both brewer's and winemaker's licenses.

Did you have a mentor?

Rex: Michael Jackson was as close to one, I guess. I've read many of his books and I studied his New World Guide to Beer to pass the BJC P test. Now you would need many books because there are so many more beer categories. I did have the privilege of judging with him before he passed away. That certainly was an honor and a highlight of my judging career.

You do many speaking engagements in a year. What is the most frequent question you're asked?

Rex: That's easy – what's your favorite beer? To which I always explain by saying I can't answer the question unless I know the circumstance, the place, the food, the season, etc.

So how do you choose beer for personal consumption?

Rex: When I go into a store to buy beer I first think about what's missing in my cellar. I want to take home beer I think is fresh, new and has the potential to be good. I take it home and forget about it until I revisit my cellar, which I do regularly, to pick the right beer for the right occasion.

What's the funniest thing you've heard someone say about beer?

Rex: I was at a bar in New York and a gentleman, who didn't know me from Adam, said, "you know where light beer comes from, don't you?" With a perplexed look I replied "why no, please tell me." He proceeded to explain it's the first beer from the top of the vat. I didn't have the heart to correct him (laughing).

Do you see any major problems on the horizon for Michigan craft beers?

Rex: When I ask at a restaurant if they have any new beers and it's IPA, IPA, IPA - that's not good. IPA's are driving the market forward but we're getting away from that style diversity we all craved at the beginning of the craft beer movement. Back then we were running away from mass-market sameness and I see the industry coming full circle as it was with light beer, only this time it's IPAs. Another crack in the foundation is the influx of Wall Street money - investors buying breweries for the profits and not the passion for making good beer.

You have written many articles and write for the Michigan Beer Guide. Do you have a favorite column or article, one you never get tired of reading?

Rex: Yes, the column I wrote on 9/11. I remember firing up my computer that morning and seeing a burning tower. I started writing my column and equated that event to the Pearl Harbor Memorial - growing up in Hawaii, visiting that place of mass destruction, remembering seeing the hull of the Arizona bleeding oil after all those years. It wasn't a column about beer but it certainly was a day we'll never forget.

What do you consider a quality beer?

Rex: A quality beer doesn't have to be true to style but it can't have defects. If I can smell any number of chemicals I don't believe perpetuates or increases the complexity of the beer in a positive light, in my opinion, it's bad beer. For example, sourness is supposed to be part of the profile for sour beers but sourness is not in the profile of most beers. If you make a beer and it turns sour, don't try to pawn it off as a sour beer (laughing). It's just a @*!?! # beer - don't try to sell me your mistakes.

Is there one thing a novice beer drinker absolutely needs to know?

Rex: Most consumers can't recognize a quality beer. That's why education is so important. So drink up - have fun and drink a lot of different beers - Michigan beers, of course.

Thanks Rex, this has been fun - let's have another beer!