

# The Washington Post

## Sam Adams Is Big. Maybe Too Big.

By Greg Kitsock  
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When America's craft brewers gathered in Boston last month for their annual conference and trade show, Boston Beer Co. founder Jim Koch feted them with a clambake at his brewery. Whole lobsters were plopped onto serving trays, and guests could choose from 30 types of beer: not just mainstays such as Samuel Adams Boston Lager, but also experimental brews not yet released to the public, including a kriek flavored with tart black Michigan cherries.

Koch's hospitality, however, won't prevent the inevitable. Perhaps as early as this year, and most likely by the end of the next, his fellow craft brewers no longer will regard him as one of their own. He'll be allowed to remain in the Brewers Association, the small-brewers' trade group, as an associate member, but his barrelage will be expunged from its statistics.

It's nothing personal.

The association defines a "craft brewery" as one that's small, independent and traditional, and "small" specifically means "annual production of beer less than 2 million barrels." Boston Beer shipped 1.992 million barrels last year.

Two million barrels, explains Paul Gatzka, director of the Brewers Association, is the ceiling for the small brewers tax differential, passed by Congress in 1976. Eligible brewers pay \$7 a barrel on their first 60,000 barrels as opposed to the regular \$18-a-barrel fee.

Koch considers that an "arbitrary and irrelevant" criterion. "I don't think the IRS should be determining what craft beer is," he asserts.

Boston Beer meets the other conditions of being a craft brewer. It doesn't lighten its beers with corn and rice, and it isn't partly or wholly owned by an alcohol producer that isn't itself a craft brewer.

When the Brewers Association directors codified the new definition in 2006, they might not have expected the maker of Samuel Adams to graduate so quickly into the ranks of the large national brewers. Boston Beer reported an 8 percent spurt in volume last year, higher than the craft category as a whole. (The second-largest craft brewer, Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., turned out fewer than 700,000 barrels last year.)

Inasmuch as Boston Beer's output accounted for 23 percent of total U.S. craft volume in 2008, it's going to leave an awfully big hole when it gets booted. "When that day comes, you're going to see a lot of asterisks in our statistics," acknowledges Gatzka.

It might also reopen a thorny debate: If the beer tastes fine, do drinkers really care whether it was mixed in a soup pot or in a vessel that could float a battleship?

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A small but passionate minority apparently does care. So megabrewers such as Anheuser-Busch and Coors have released craft beer knockoffs under bucolic-sounding corporate pseudonyms. The six-pack holder for Blue Moon Belgian White, for instance, lists a fictitious "Blue Moon Brewing Company," founded in 1995, as the manufacturer. In fact, Blue Moon is a Coors brand.

In her documentary "Beer Wars," filmmaker Anat Baron goes prowling in Fairfield, Calif., for the Green Valley Brewing Co., supposed maker of organic beers Stone Creek Pale Ale and Wild Hop. She draws a blank from locals when she asks for directions. Finally, she discovers the source, pointing her camera through a chain-link fence at a looming Anheuser-Busch factory.

Such deception is a sore point for craft brewers, who fear that big-brewery brands will confuse customers. During last week's American Craft Beer Week, the Brewers Association asked its supporters to sign an online "Declaration of Beer Independence" that reads in part, "I declare to practice the concept of 'Informed Consumption' which has me deserving to know if my beer comes from a small and independent brewer or if it is owned by a mass production brewing company." As of Monday, the document had garnered nearly 10,110 signers.

Even when big-brewery labels are honest about their origin, their makers can push so much beer through the pipeline that smaller craft brands inevitably will get bumped. Gatzka notes that during its first 60 days of release, Budweiser American Ale picked up 9,000 tap handles.

Jim Koch likes to remind people that size is relative. Anheuser-Busch spills more beer in a year than he brews, he has often insisted. Sam Adams accounts for only about 0.5 percent of U.S. beer consumption.

Nowadays, most of the Sam Adams you see in stores is brewed at plants in Cincinnati and Fogelsville, Pa. Koch's much smaller Boston brewery serves as a pilot plant, where he and his brew crew cook up about 30 new recipes a year. Their experiments include a gueuze, a mouth-puckering, earthy blend of young and old ales that have been fermented with wild microorganisms. The style is rarely brewed outside Belgium.

Although Boston Beer has introduced some beers with more mass-market appeal (a light lager and an alcoholic iced tea called Twisted Tea), it has maintained a cutting-edge creativity. Koch was one of the first American brewers to dabble in barrel-aged and extreme beers, beginning with his 18 percent-alcohol-by-volume Triple Bock in 1994 and continuing on to the 2007 vintage of his Utopias (a record 27 percent alcohol). A new version of Utopias is due out this fall.

So far this year, Boston Beer has released a series of imperial styles (Imperial Stout, Imperial White and Double Bock) and a mixed six-pack containing three LongShot beers, home-brew contest winners ramped up for commercial production. The variety pack includes a superb Traditional Bock full of chocolate and coffee flavors, a Cranberry Wit and an immensely hopped Double IPA.

"When that two-millionth barrel rolls off the line, nothing's going to change," Koch maintains.

*Ask Greg Kitsock questions about beer during our Free Range online chat today at 1 p.m. at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline>. We'll give away two tickets to Savor, the sold-out beer event on May 30. Kitsock can be reached at [food@washpost.com](mailto:food@washpost.com).*

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