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A-B, craft brewers team up to improve beer's image

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On a recent Wednesday night, 85 volunteers for the upcoming St. Louis Brewers Heritage Festival gathered in the Schlafly Tap Room. Jay Cunningham worked the crowd as Dan Kopman, vice president of the company that owns the brewpub, looked on with Schlafly beer in hand.

"Five years ago, if I were to walk the halls of Anheuser-Busch and tell people we need to partner with Schlafly's, I'd probably be unemployed or working for Dan," Cunningham joked.

How times do change. Happily, Cunningham still has a job at Anheuser-Busch Cos., working as manager of global industry development at A-B's domestic brewing unit. And part of that job includes helping to organize festival activities in Forest Park today and Saturday.

The festival will features beers from local brewers as big as Anheuser-Busch, which shipped 102.3 million barrels domestically last year, and those as small as Square One Brewery, which produced about 450 barrels last year.

The event is a striking display of cooperation between the biggest U.S. beer maker and the batch of craft brewers in its backyard. It also may be a sign of the times in the roiled domestic beer industry.

Why, exactly, are these mismatched competitors getting set to toast each other? Or, as phrased by Bob Lachky, A-B's executive vice president of global industry development, "Why is the lion with the mouse?"

Because the fortunes of large and small brewers are linked to the image of beer, which has lost some of its luster in recent years.

Beer's share of alcohol consumed in the United States slid to 57 percent last year from 61.3 percent in 1995 as wine and distilled spirits, such as vodka and rum, attracted drinkers looking for variety and zesty flavors.

The festival's main goal is to raise the profile and prestige of beer, and thereby help reverse beer's decline. In that respect, local brewers are natural allies.

Sure, "You get into battle mode and you fight for shelf space," said Tony Caradonna, co-founder of O'Fallon Brewery. On the other hand, "With A-B's might, to get this kind of advertising and exposure ... of St. Louis as a beer town, that helps me when I'm trying to sell beer."

The festival fits into A-B's "Here's to Beer" campaign, designed to promote beer as a sociable, refreshing drink appropriate for occasions ranging from fine dining to club-hopping. In recent years, wine sellers caught brewers flat-footed by playing up tasty pairings of wine and food.

"When you're not being considered for occasions, that's a problem," Lachky said.

At the festival, chefs from local restaurants will chat with visitors about

combining certain food with, say, smoked porter or unfiltered wheat brews.

All the better, local brewers say, if St. Louis can reclaim some of the buzz lost to craft-beer destinations such as Denver — which last year attracted 41,000 people to the Great American Beer Festival.

"There's no reason St. Louis shouldn't be established as the beer capital of the United States," said Lachky. "This is really a mecca and a birthplace of beer. ... Anheuser-Busch, Lemp, Griesedieck — all of those guys were craft brewers at one time."

The festival represents one more turn in the evolving relationship between Anheuser-Busch and craft brewers in St. Louis and across the country.

The area's biggest craft brewer is St. Louis Brewery Inc., the owner of the Tap Room in downtown west and the Bottleworks in Maplewood.

Tom Schlafly, co-founder of St. Louis Brewery and name-bearer of the Schlafly beer brand, recalled "a tremendously flattering" visit by a busload of A-B employees in 1993. They came to a private party at the Tap Room to check out the new craft brewery — and explore what was still a novel corner of the industry.

But as the growth rate of craft beer outpaces big-batch domestic beers, the attitude emanating from One Busch Place has morphed from cautious interest into active involvement in specialty beers.

A-B has minority stakes in craft breweries in Seattle, Portland and — since earlier this year — Ashburn, Va. The country's biggest brewer also is developing more niche products, rolling out organic beers, regional varieties and seasonal brews such as Spring Heat Spiced Wheat.

"Anheuser-Busch is no longer saying, well, if it doesn't sell 3 million barrels, it's a failure," said Lachky, who is considering brewing beer at home after spending months preparing for the festival. "If you get a lot of little victories, it can add up to a lot."

Brainstorming for the festival began more than a year ago. In January last year, brewers across the country, including Anheuser-Busch and Schlafly, made their own versions of "Poor Richard's Ale" to commemorate the birth of Benjamin Franklin, a founding father and lover of beer.

After rubbing shoulders at Anheuser-Busch's tour center, Lachky and Kopman, vice president of St. Louis Brewery, held a meeting at the Tap Room.

They previously had batted around ideas for "Here's to Beer," brainstorming what might resonate with drinkers. Over a Schlafly beer, they discussed teaming up for a beer festival.

The logistic challenges were impressive: finding a neutral site and enough tents to accommodate thousands of visitors.

"The level of cooperation, the level of trust has really been enjoyable," said Kopman, the unofficial liaison to a half-dozen local craft breweries. "This is about proving to St. Louis and the world that this is a beer town."

Master brewers and beer makers in St. Louis have nurtured a spirit of camaraderie for years even as their companies compete, said Florian Kuplent, brewmaster at Anheuser-Busch.

"It's a big family — we're all friends," said Kuplent, who helped A-B churn out about a dozen beers for the festival.

The festival will feature 50 varieties of beer, identified only by the brewer and style, such as pale ale. Only beers made in the St. Louis area will be included. Each brewer also will make its own version of a dark lager derived from a recipe that Anheuser-Busch historians traced back more than 100 years.

The festival, organizers stress, is not a competition. Competition happens elsewhere, as local breweries wrestle for scarce shelf space and tap handles in an increasingly fragmented market.

"We're not going to stop trying to convince our consumers to enjoy Anheuser-Busch products," said Lachky. But for now, "The idea is to say to folks, 'Look at the styles of beer that are available.' This is about elevating the image of beer."

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