

Women increasing their presence in Wisconsin craft beer scene

Posted on Wednesday, Dec 7, 2022

Beermaking has traditionally been a man's job. But the craft brewing industry — and pioneering women in the field — are changing that.

And they are supporting each other through a group called the Pink Boots Society, a national organization made up of women in the brewery business. In Wisconsin, the organization has 55 members. It is open to women who work in all areas of the beer industry.

WisBusiness.com asked a former editor, Brian Clark, to scope out women in Wisconsin's craft brewing industry.

Here are four of their stories:

Jessica and Erika Jones, Madison (pictured here)

In their previous (working) lives, Jessica Jones was a Lutheran minister, and her spouse, Erika, toiled in the nonprofit world.

But the pair left those careers behind and say they've found their true calling with the Giant Jones craft brewery, which they opened four years ago on Madison's east side.

Since then, Giant Jones has won a number of awards, including a recent bronze at the Great American Beer Festival in September for its Doppelsticke Altbier in the "Other Strong Beer" category.

The couple — both of whom grew up in the Fox Valley — operate one of the few women-owned breweries in the state.

"The impetus for starting our own brewery was simply that we both really like beer," explained Erika, who said they began with home brewing when they were living in Berkeley, Calif. "Then we met some professional brewers and just fell in love with craft beer and the craft beer community."

The couple studied numerous beer styles, took part in a beer certification program and toyed with the idea of opening their own craft brewery for a decade before focusing on strong, organic beers. Their flavorful brews pack a punch and are 7 percent ABV (alcohol by weight) and up.

“We also wanted to work with sustainable agriculture and prove that organic beer can taste delicious,” Erika said. “That’s been our passion.”

The pair- now in their early 40s — returned to Wisconsin when Erika was accepted to graduate school at UW-Madison.

“We also realized we’d never be able to start a brewery in California because of the high cost,” Erika said. “And we also thought it was unethical to do that with the water shortage there and other resource management problems the state is facing. Besides, there was already a huge number of craft breweries there.

“In addition to having family here, one of the big centers of organic farming is in the Driftless Region of Wisconsin, so there was an existing supply chain for a lot of our needs. We really felt this was a good fit.”

She said they have met no overt discrimination being women in a male-dominated industry. Moreover, they’ve received help from men on their journey.

“One of the things that we’ve loved about the craft beer industry is its collaboration and collegiality and open sharing. No one ever said women shouldn’t do this,” she said.

“We have surprised a few people, though,” she said. “And we do like to challenge expectations because many people don’t expect women to be in this role. So for us, it’s been a great opportunity to challenge stereotypes.

“We want to prove that women can do anything,” she said. “Hopefully this is only the beginning and more women will get into it. We are showing that that’s possible.”

Esther Gvora, La Crosse

In La Crosse, Esther Gvora is an assistant brewer at the Turtle Stack Brewery on Second Street, just a block from the Mississippi River.

She said she fell into the job after working at another brewery in Eau Claire as a bartender.

"I've always done very physical jobs and they asked me to help with canning and production. I started learning about how beer is made and really liked it," she said.

But she did not enjoy the way she was treated and said she was incensed when she learned that the man she was training was making \$6 an hour more than she was.

"As a woman in the industry, I won't say it's been easy," she said. "In fact, it's been a pain at times, like in any male-dominated industry. We're not always accepted .

"Luckily, where I work now, my head brewer doesn't give a sh*t that I am a woman and that is exactly what I want personally. He says this is the job that I want you to do and I know you can do it. I am in a very good place now."

Still, when she tends bar, she said it is annoying when some seem surprised that she knows a lot about beer.

"I don't like it when people don't take me seriously because I'm a woman," she said. "And it doesn't help that I'm only five feet tall. So I take myself seriously. I've also sought out other women who are doing this for support, like in Pink Boots."

Gvora, who is 26, said she one day might want to own her own brewery.

"Absolutely," she said. "Right now I'm in a great place for education and I'm learning from someone, brewmaster Brent Martinson, who is really knowledgeable about the different styles of beer, how to make them perfectly, scientifically and artistically.

"But I can't wait to take more responsibility around here. And then somewhere down the line, do more."

She said her advice for women who want to go into brewing is to assert themselves.

"And don't tolerate the things you feel you shouldn't be tolerating. Because there is a space for you in the industry. If you feel that someone is patronizing you or you are not being seen, tell them.

"And if they are not listening, get out of there. My mistake with the previous brewery was that I should have gotten out of there a lot earlier."

Abigail Malcom, Green Bay

Abigail Malcom became interested in beer on a backpacking trip in Europe when she was in college back in 2003. Today, she is co-owner of Zambaldi Brewing in Green Bay.

"I was at the Haufbrau Haus in Munich and ordered a Diet Coke because I wasn't a beer drinker then," she recalled. "Pretty embarrassing, right?"

"But it turned out it was about three times the price of a beer. I was poor, so I ordered a hefeweizen and thought it was delicious. That was my first full beer and I figured 'Hey, I could get into this.'

"Then, because I was in Germany, I tried lots of other beers."

On returning to school at UW-Stout, where she got a degree in hospitality, she met her future husband, who was an avid home brewer.

It wasn't long before they began "dreaming and scheming" about running their own brewery.

They both worked at Titledown Brewing in Green Bay for a while before moving to Montana and then California. They returned to Green Bay and opened Zambaldi in 2020, six weeks before the pandemic hit.

They've persevered and thrived, she said. And of the eight employees at Zambaldi, five are women.

"There have been moments when I've had to put on my thick skin, because this remains a male-dominated industry," she mused.

"But now more than ever, there is a strong community of women with Pink Boots society in the beer industry. We send out weekly email blasts about our struggles to lift each other up so we can continue to be an ever-growing part of this industry.

"David and I think that representation is important. If you look at our logo, you'll see a man and a woman drinking a beer together. You know when you walk in the door

that this is a place where women are welcome. We want all to feel welcome in our space.

“We know that women frequently get boxed out of being in the industry and even consuming craft beer. For such a long time, it was such a boy’s club. We feel there is no need for that.”

She said she also believes that women have more delicate palates, which makes them better craft beer consumers. According to an article published in Nature Neuroscience in 2002, she’s correct: <https://www.nature.com/articles/nn803>.

“Women had evolved to have better palates to test food for poison for babies. So we can taste different and more subtle compounds in beer than men.”

She said she tells women interested in brewing to “educate yourself on all things beer and all things business.

“Then reach out and find someone who has paved the way, other female brewers, other owners, because we are happy to share our journey with someone who is willing to get into this business. So I’d say find a mentor and become part of the community. It is a community that lifts each other up and supports each other.”

“We want to prove that women can do anything,” she said. “Hopefully this is only the beginning and more women will get into it. We are showing that that’s possible.”

Samantha Danen, Milwaukee

In Milwaukee, Samantha Danen has been a brewer at Third Space Brewing for two years. The self-described “beer nerd” was at Company Brewing for five years before that and heads the Wisconsin chapter of the Pink Boots Society.

Though she has a degree in art history from UW-Milwaukee, her story is familiar: She fell in love with home brewing and craft beer.

After graduation in 2013, she started to look for brewery jobs, but had no luck.

“Back then, there weren’t that many craft breweries around and very few women in the industry. Most of the breweries were big like Miller or Sprecher or Lakefront and no one was hiring.”

In spite of the misogyny and condescension she encountered, the 31-year-old Danen persevered. She got her first job in 2015 and became what she calls the first female craft brewer in Milwaukee.

"I pretty much begged and pleaded my way into a spot at Company Brewing," explained Danen, who eventually became head brewer. And she said she constantly had to prove herself, especially to outsiders.

Unlike other women she knows, she said she's never experienced harassment in her workplaces.

At Third Space, she's one of two women on a team of six brewers.

"I see myself working here for a long time," she said. "I work alongside a bunch of talented brewers and we are all on equal playing field. There's not a hierarchy like at other places."

But Danen said she doesn't foresee starting her own brewery.

"I've thought a lot about that over the years, but would not want to own my own brewery because it is a 24-hour-a-day job, always being available. I'd rather run someone else's brewery.

"Besides, I want to have a work/life balance. I'm married and would like to have children someday. My family would always be more important to me than my job."

But if a woman wants to own her own brewery, she says: "Go for it."

"Don't let anyone get in your way or stop you or tell you are not good enough or know enough are smart enough or strong enough to work in brewing. If you are passionate and want it, you can absolutely do it."

"Get as much advice from others who have gone before you so you can avoid obstacles that are in place because there are so many hurdles that come with owning your own brewery."

And mentors don't necessarily have to be women, she said.

"Even though the industry is mostly older white men, there are a lot of good guys out there who want to see us succeed, too," she added.

“For the most part, Wisconsin breweries have each other’s backs and want the best for each other. There is competition, but we’d rather not see others fail. We always want to be there to lend advice or materials or whatever it might be.”

See more on Giant Jones: <https://giantjones.com/>

See more on Turtle Stack Brewery: <https://turtlestackbrewery.com/>

See more on Zambaldi Brewing: <http://www.zambaldi.com/>

See more on Third Space Brewing: <https://thirdspacebrewing.com/>

See more on the Pink Boots Society: <https://www.pinkbootssociety.org/>

— *By Brian E. Clark*

For WisBusiness.com