The Lager Beer Revolution in the United States

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The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Šimková**.

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In November 2015, a record that had lasted 142 years was broken: for the first time since 1873, the peak number of breweries passed 4,131. Since then, the number of US breweries has continued to reach new heights. The last time breweries multiplied at this rate was between 1850 and 1873, from 431 breweries in 1850 to over 1,200 in 1860, and 4,131 in 1873. While the number of breweries declined after 1873 until Prohibition in 1920, total beer production and per capita consumption of beer continued to increase—in fact, per capita consumption quintupled between 1860 and 1910, from four gallons to over 20 gallons (roughly 15 to 75 liters).

Today this staggering growth is due to the—historically speaking—relatively new craft beer movement; but back in the nineteenth century, German American immigrants and their lager beer were at the heart of this brewing transformation. It is not a coincidence that the time when the number of breweries in the US reached its peak in the 1870s was also a time when German American migration was steadily increasing.

As **Jeffrey Pilcher** has rightly pointed out in his recent blog post, lager beer is a product of globalization that has been (re)invented in locations around the world. In light of the current craft beer revolution, taking a closer look at lager beer's introduction in the United States is particularly intriguing not only in terms of sheer numbers, but also with regard to taste and the attitude towards beer and drinking habits.

The US breweries of the nineteenth century were disproportionately owned and operated by German Americans. For instance, the 1880 census showed that 80.5 percent

of the brewers were of German descent and the beverage industry had the heaviest German concentration among male employees. Besides the brewing centers on the East Coast (in particular New York and Philadelphia), the Midwestern states, also called "America's German Belt," developed into brewing powerhouses, especially the "beer triangle states" Wisconsin, Missouri, and Ohio.

German Americans not only propelled the American beer industry to new heights, they also introduced a new style of beer: lager beer. While today lager beer is not the most popular drink, in the nineteenth century it was just as "new" and exciting as today's IPAs and pale ales: it was lighter, more sparkling, and lasted longer than the British-style ales and porters. Before 1850, British-style ale had accounted for about 80 percent of national beer production—by 1900, German-style lager made up nearly 90 percent.

The brewers promoted their beer as a traditional product being brewed according to the German *Reinheitsgebot,* the world's oldest consumer protection law, which does not allow any additives except for malted barley, hops, and water in beer production. However, most brewers used inferior **six-row barley instead of the more expensive two-row barley** typically used for German beers. While both types of barley were introduced and grown in the US, six-row barley produces greater yields per acre and has a higher protein level and enzyme content, which makes it less expensive than two-row barley. Moreover, as early as the 1870s, brewers began replacing barley with adjuncts such as corn and rice. The result was a cheaper but also lighter and less hoppy (some would even say a rather pale and bland) beer, very different from the European beers. And yet, Germany served as the country of reference for high-quality beer.

In addition to revolutionizing the American consumption of beer in terms of taste, German American immigrants also brought with them a distinct beer drinking culture that revolutionized American attitudes towards beer consumption. While American saloons were associated with manhood, crime, and corruption, beer gardens became known for their sociability, family friendliness, and G*emütlichkeit*. By the turn of the century, every major city across the US had a beer garden situated adjacent to the breweries, in parks, or on the outskirts.

Beer gardens were usually large halls with tables for people to sit at. Besides selling beer, these venues provided a "piece of home" for German Americans and served as meeting places for the public at large. In 1890 a rather elaborate article in the *New York Sun* described the local beer garden on Staten Island as a "German Paradise ... flowing

with beer of Bavarian excellence," which has become "the Mecca of all Brooklyn, New York, and Jersey City." Yet, it is

> no garden at all, as American gardens go. It is a fragment of German pleasure ground, broken off from the shore of the Necker [sic] or the crest of some Thuringen hill, swept over the ocean with the great tide of Teutonic immigration and drifted into its new seclusion near the bay shore.

The rather astonished author observed that the beer garden's distinctive feature was its "peacefulness and homelike freedom" where "profanity, drunkenness, shouting, and fighting" were unknown. In turn, the beer garden's family friendliness helped the brewers to promote their beer as a temperance beverage, a pure and healthy drink to be consumed outdoors.

This relatively positive image of German American drinking culture changed with the growing temperance movement and America's entry into the First World War, which greatly affected the brewing industry and eventually led to national Prohibition in 1920. About a half century later, the American beer landscape was again transformed by craft brewing. This has not only sparked a new interest in classic beers such as English-style pale ales or Belgian-style blonde ales, but also in hybrid-style beers such as German-style Kolsch or American cream ale. The current craft beer movement has also revitalized German-style beer gardens. For example, five years ago the Estabrook Beer Garden opened in Milwaukee, calling itself "America's Beer Garden: The First Public Beer Garden in the USA since Prohibition," inviting its visitor to "come and experience Gemütlichkeit."

While today's beer renaissance is led by American pioneers, back in the nineteenth century, it was German immigrants who triggered the lager beer revolution in the United States. Anheuser-Busch, Pabst, Schlitz, Miller—all of these are familiar and famous breweries that were started by German immigrants and forever changed America's drinking culture.