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Shmaltz Brewing Company's Jews' Brews

The fast-growing Bay Area brewer loves a good pun.

By [Alastair Bland](#)

In 1997, a young entrepreneur walked into Berkeley's **Holy Land Restaurant** carrying a handful of sample beers. The managers of the College Avenue falafel house, amused by the clever artwork and literature printed on the bottles' labels and pleased by the brew inside them, gave the vendor a chance and put his so-called "Genesis Ale" on the menu. Holy Land, fittingly, became one of the very first accounts for the new beer, the first release from **Shmaltz Brewing Company**.

Born in San Francisco in late-1996, Shmaltz is now one of the fastest-growing craft breweries in America. Plenty has changed since the company began. For instance, owner and founder **Jeremy Cowan** no longer hand-delivers his beers to retailers. Nor does he struggle to sell his product, available now in 25 states and, locally, at **Beer Revolution**, **Barclay's Restaurant and Pub**, **Berkeley Bowl**, **Jupiter**, Holy Land Restaurant, and **The Bistro**.

Interestingly, peers in the beer business no longer advise Cowan to lighten up on the Jewish jokes, he said — best seen in the pun-intended trademark beers Jewbelation and Rejewvenator — if he wants to make it big. "People once said I should make the label more generic, that I should be broader to reach a wider audience," Cowan recalls.

But it's the Semitic theme of Shmaltz and its main label, **He'Brew: The Chosen Beer**, that has gained the company renown. He launched the label as something of a Jewish art project — "a vehicle to celebrate my culture and civilization," he said. The idea was conceived in his Mission District apartment, and he had the first one-hundred-case batch of Genesis Ale brewed at a small homebrewing facility in Cupertino.

The craft beer market was expanding rapidly at the time, and irreverence and humor became Shmaltz's signature gag. As the company matured, Shmaltz launched a second label — equally gag-oriented as Shmaltz, if a bit less Jewish: the Coney Island Craft Lagers series. Inspired by New York's amusement park and its sideshow circus characters, the brand now features seven lagers, including the monster Human Blockhead, a brawny 10 percent ABV beer scheduled for release in June.

In its eighth winter, meanwhile, Shmaltz released the first He'Brew label Jewbelation, an anniversary beer brewed with eight malts and eight hops and an alcohol level of 8 percent. The next year, the beer showcased the number nine. Birthday by birthday, Jewbelation has ascended to celebrity status, and this December the rich brown ale will hit a potency of 15 percent ABV. Cowan, who recently wrote a memoir titled *Craft Beer Bar Mitzvah*, promises the numbers will keep climbing. "The Jewbelation series has become one of our rock-star beers," he said. "We can't stop now."