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Raising a frothy pint to celebrate He'Brew beer's bar mitzvah

by Emma Silvers

It began as a joke. It was the late '80s, and Jeremy Cowan was 18 years old. He and his buddies were drinking light beer and playing volleyball in Atherton on a warm summer day when an accidental division of teams — Jews vs. Gentiles — led to the kind of clowning around 18-year-olds drinking light beer and playing volleyball are bound to make.

“Go Team Jew!” yelled their friends from the sidelines. “Jew Crüe! Two Live Jews!”

At some point, the idea for the Shmaltz Brewing Company just kind of “popped out,” Cowan writes in his 2010 book “Craft Beer Bar Mitzvah,” written to celebrate the 13th anniversary of his beer-making enterprise.

“This team needs its own beer,” Cowan remembers saying. “You know what: The Jews need their own beer. We’ll call it He'Brew. And the tagline will be ‘Don’t pass out — Passover.’”

The rest, as they say, is history, though it’s a tale more likely to be found in your local bookstore than in any California history class.

The 300-page book, subtitled “How It Took 13 Years, Extreme Jewish Brewing, and Circus Sideshow Freaks to Make Shmaltz Brewing Company an International Success,” is one part small business memoir, one part coming-of-age story and one part reflection on life as a young, beer-drinking, American Jew.

From the days when Cowan distributed the brew from the trunk of his grandmother’s car in San Francisco up through the present — Shmaltz now lends its name to six styles of He'Brew beers and six Coney Island brand lagers (produced in partnership with a nonprofit that benefits Coney Island) — the company aims to celebrate Jewish life in both traditional and irreverent ways.

Sure, it has a beer named for Lenny Bruce (a launch party featured Sarah Silverman and Lewis Black), but the company also has made sure to include Torah passages on bottles and six-packs that relate to imbibing or represent the company ethic. (All such citations are included in one of the book’s many comprehensive appendices.)

I was engaged by the narrative of how Cowan grew closer to the Jewish community through his journey with brewing. Like me, he was raised culturally Jewish in the Bay Area but was unaffiliated and mostly uninvolved with other Jews in any formal way.

One of his original goals with the company was to draw in other Jews like him with marketing that celebrated cultural touchstones: an affinity for Mel Brooks films, the search for the perfect Reuben. Then, at 25, a trip to Israel bolstered his sense of identification as a Jew.

A funny side effect of becoming more involved in the Jewish community: It pushes you outward at the same time, makes you want to share your culture with non-Jews — let them know there are points of commonality.

Just as I’ve had non-Jewish friends inquire about the story of Passover after happily accepting a second bowl of matzah ball soup, He'Brew beers have introduced countless beer aficionados to fundamental tenets of Judaism just by the nature of references on the labels.

The biggest beer snob I know, a friend who happens to be Catholic, shot me a text message while he was home for Christmas last year — accompanied by a photo of He'Brew’s own fruit-infused, Belgian-style Rejewvenator beer. “Just wanted to let you know,” it read, “I am thinking of your people.”

Brimming with enthusiasm for both craft beer culture and an evolving appreciation of socially conscious Judaism, Cowan’s book touches on the brew’s ability to bring people together. The writing is lighthearted, but more resonant than one might expect — if it were a beer, it would be, say, an extra-pale IPA. Or perhaps a Jewbilation Brown Ale?

Either of which, come to think of it, would make excellent pairings for this read, ideally on a lazy afternoon, perched on a sunny patio somewhere. American Craft Beer Week starts Monday, May 16, so it’s really a seasonally appropriate thing to do.

And as for unexpected career paths that begin as a joke — L’Chaim!