

# WHAT PEOPLE DRINK

**JEREMY COWEN**  
Founder Shmaltz Brewing Co.

Interview by Alan Kropf // Photography by Ian Andraea

Shmaltz Brewing Co., has officially passed into adulthood. The Jewish inspired brewery celebrates its 13th year and has taken on epic projects for its bar mitzvah including distillation and super-barrel aged beers. Mutineer Magazine schlepped over to San Francisco to talk to founder, Jeremy Cowen, about these endeavors and some of the other stuff that He'Brew.



**WHAT WAS THE LAST THING YOU DRANK?** Thirty seconds ago I took the last sip of my FiftyFifty RyePA from a Northern California brewery called FiftyFifty, one of my favorites that don't distribute far and wide. It's a treat to get them at City Beer.

**SO BEER, WHAT ARE YOU DRINKING RIGHT NOW, WHAT ARE YOU INTO?** We've had a good run of some barrel aged stuff, so I've been exploring those directions with a lot of different breweries from around the country at beer festivals in particular, also with rye beers. We put out a beer called Vertical Jewbelation, which just came out this year. It's a blend of seven different anniversary beer recipes, all aged in Sazerac six-year rye whiskey barrels, and that has been an amazing transformation for us.

It's the most complicated beer we've ever made; each one of the beers is complicated to brew. Then creating them all separately into the barrels and blending them together to create that last über eighth beer was a total delicious adventure.

And then on the rye side, from years ago I loved Bear Republic Hop Rod Rye, and for my tenth anniversary, I wanted to do a tribute to Lenny Bruce, who was a Jewish comedian from the '50s and '60s. He was known for having a very aggressive sense of satire, but he also was known to have a bit of a softer side to his private personality.

I called the beer Bittersweet Lenny's R.I.P.A., and it's a rye-based double IPA that's brewed with 20% rye malt and three different types of rye malt. It's 10% alcohol, and brewed with just about every hop in the brewery. The goal with that beer was to create a very different direction with a double IPA. I love Dogfish Head 90 Minute IPA, Stone Ruination IPA, the big Bell's Hopslam and Lagunitas Hop Stoopid. I love those beers, but they tend to be a little bit paler in color and focus on bitterness, citrus and fruit.

We wanted to make a double IPA that was built around the rye malt and the malt profile, and the hops are kind of layers and layers of experience inside the construct of the rye malt. So that's what we were shooting for with that beer, which we barrel aged the hell out of last year and released for the first time in bottles.

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT HOW IT CAME OUT?** I was thrilled; it was even more aggressive than I was anticipating, and we had been experimenting with one or two barrels of it in past years. They came out with this soft vanilla, nougat kind of candy bar booze and hops. I just absolutely adored the soft version of it, but the Sazerac six-year barrels just accelerated what was already a 10% rye double IPA.

You really taste the rye whiskey. It's a little bit more aggressive, and I wouldn't necessarily say harsher or more abrasive because it depends on what you're used to. For me, I love rye whiskey and it's been a great way to tie in my curiosity about rye whiskey with bringing this beer even more into the rye arena.

**SO YOU'RE A BIG RYE WHISKEY FAN?** Yeah I'm trying, and it's one of those passions that if you're in the right place at the right moment, you're incredibly lucky. I got to taste the whole lineup of the boutique ends of the Buffalo Trace Sazerac family at a distillery here in Northern California when I was dropping off a 3-gallon barrel of Hudson Baby Bourbon Whiskey that we were going to use for a project called Schmaltz Liquor that we're just starting to do.

Basically we're taking Jewbelation, our anniversary series, the rye double IPA, R.I.P.A. and Human Blockhead from the Coney Island line, and we're distilling all three of those separately and then aging them in different formats. So we did the first one for SF Beer Week a couple weeks ago, and it was a huge success. We're incredibly excited about the flavors, and that night I got to try the whole lineup of boutique spirits from Buffalo Trace, who uses a lot of rye in what they do.

**WHAT DO YOU DRINK WITH BREAKFAST ON A TYPICAL DAY?** I've been toying with going back to the good old days. I used to drink a ton of milk when I was a little kid. Lately, to compliment my beer drinking and whiskey explorations, I've been trying to drink a little

more milk in the morning. So, I'm sticking with 1% for the moment. Throw in a little orange juice to spice it up. I'm a fan of Martinelli's apple juice. I don't know if I'm a sucker for that damn little glass apple. For Schmaltz Brewing Company, I suppose people would expect us to be interested in packaging, but it also tastes really fantastic.

**WE TOUCHED ON WHISKEY AND BEER, DO YOU DRINK WINE AT ALL?** It's funny because I love a little bit of wine, and for the life of me I'm the worst at remembering brands. But lately, I've been enjoying everything, and actually this spring, I've been drinking a little more wine than usual because I had an incredibly intense winter with travels and beer. I figured I'd mix it up just a little bit. I usually like blends; I like wines like I like our beers.

I like hybrid styles that aren't classics of any particular genre. I'm more interested in finished flavor than I am in the purity of the process, so lately I've been enjoying some red blends that might have cab-merlot or meritages or some white kind of unusual blend of varietals. I enjoy that more than the benchmark chardonnay or the benchmark pinot noir. It may just be the genetics of my palate, but I enjoy multilayered taste experiences. That tends to come more from hybrids, experimentals and blends than it does from this kind of purity of varietal.

**NON-ALCOHOLIC, WHAT DO YOU DRINK?** I'm a big fan of sparkling (not that particularly bizarre), but juice related sparkling drinks. I just haven't been able to follow the kombucha craze. I just like quality non-high fructose sparkling juice drinks and again a lot of blends. Up the street from my house in the Mission District in San Francisco, there are endless delicious bodegas that have fresh fruit drinks, aguas frescas, everyday.

I always get a half cantaloupe/half strawberry or a little bit of pineapple and watermelon, so I love drinking those kinds of drinks. I had an incredible guided tour through very high end teas here in San Francisco at a friend's tea house, and it blew me away. It was so much fun and so interesting the differences that come from these very specialty tea varieties. That was something I have never experienced before.

**YOU MENTIONED YOU'VE BEEN DOING A LOT OF TRAVELING. WHAT'S THE BEST RECENT BEVERAGE RELATED TRAVEL EXPERIENCE THAT YOU'VE HAD?** Oh man, I was on the road the last four months of last year pretty much straight, and we had everything from a 28-draft line beer dinner in Jacksonville— 28 draft lines in one night of just our stuff, everything that we've ever made and a few things we've never released— which was pretty spectacular. All the way through to just recently in SF Beer Week, the distillery event we just did. Taking 650 gallons of five different versions of Jewbelation, distilling it down and tasting it right off the still as it blended together on the other end was exceptional.

It was like something I've never tried before, and that was a really meaningful marker for how far this little project has evolved. That was a good run. I mean, I'm spoiled because when I get to travel, I'm around the best beer in the world everywhere I go. It's the best beer from everywhere in the country everywhere I go, so I'm usually in the better beer bars where people are passionate about this craft beer explosion. I get to explore brands from all over the country that don't ever get distributed outside of their state or special one-offs that are from local breweries.

**THROW OUT A COUPLE OF NAMES.** I like being in Michigan, and I think Short's is making awesome beer. Ithaca in upstate New York, who doesn't distribute very widely. I think they're making exceptional beers that are small batch series. On the West Coast, I mean we're obviously spoiled with having access to Pizza Port, Lost Abbey and Russian River, but FiftyFifty and even some of the brew pubs now are making absolutely world-class beer that you could put up against anybody in the world.

You could put it up against Stone and Dogfish Head of course, but you could put it up against brewers from all over the world. The talented brewpub brewers now are making amazing stuff. I had a spectacular lineup of beers at Triple Rock in Berkeley the other night. Those guys have been in business for almost longer than anybody, and they have some very, very talented brewers who have been experimenting and always have something unusual and fantastic. One of my favorite beers lately was at the opening night of SF Beer Week, Hop Salad from Drake's. I just thought it was a totally interesting, unique and yet an absolutely delicious take on a strong IPA.

◀ Jeremy Cowen at City Beer Store San Francisco, CA