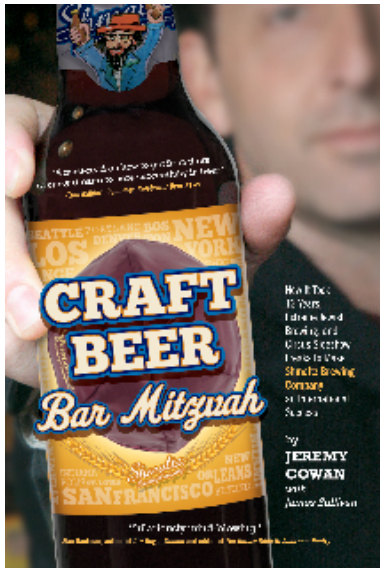


ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Monday, November 14, 2011

Shmaltz Brewing founder tells his company's story in new book

By Evan Benn



Jeremy Cowan launched Shmaltz Brewing Co. in 1996 by selling cases of his He'Brew beer out of the trunk of his grandmother's Volvo. Today, Shmaltz's brands — He'Brew and Coney Island Craft Lagers — are available in 25 states, including Missouri, and Cowan's company is a definitive success story in the increasingly competitive field of craft beer.

Cowan will be in St. Louis for two appearances this week to read from and sign copies of "Craft Beer Bar Mitzvah" (Malt Shop Publishing, \$16.99). On Thursday he'll be at the Jewish Community Center as an addendum to the St. Louis Jewish Book Festival; on Nov. 19, he'll stop at Left Bank Books downtown.

The book explores Shmaltz's first 13 years in business and looks at how Cowan has carved out a niche with equal parts envelope-pushing beers and pun-filled shtick. Cowan spoke with the Post-Dispatch about the book, his love of writing and the stereotype that Jews don't drink beer.

Q • You write the text for all of your beer labels, which are often full of history and some tongue-in-cheek humor. Why is it important for you to communicate with your customers in that medium, and why not farm it out to a marketing person?

A • I think our labels really show more of our personal sensibilities than a concrete marketing decision. We use those as a way to answer, "Why are we doing this? Why does this product exist?" The stories on the side of our labels, we hope, reflect the inspiration for the liquid inside the bottle. We want all of that — the narrative, the packaging, the marketing, the events we promote — to bring an even deeper, more exciting, more delicious experience for the people who enjoy our beers.

Q • Was the book a natural progression from the other writing you do for the company?

A • (Laughs.) Yeah, I was like, I really like to write beer labels, so why not try an entire 300-page book? To me, there is something very romantic and glamorous about books and writing. My grandmother was an English teacher, and she self-published a few works. I was a literature and humanities major, so I also love books. But more than that, it was an opportunity to tell the in-depth story about our company. The compliments I get that I'm most proud of are when someone comes up and says, "Hey, I read your book. The whole thing. I actually finished it." So many books about businesses are painfully boring and self-congratulatory. (Co-author James Sullivan) and I didn't want to do that. We wanted to show the roller coaster of starting and running a small business and keep that story moving forward so people are actually compelled to read it all the way through.

Q • How do you manage to toe the line of shtick without crossing over to gimmickry?

A • We certainly use a lot of humor, irreverence, bombast and showmanship. But there is a reason for each joke, for each seemingly silly, playful element that we put out there. The reasons usually tie into culture, history, the Jewish calendar, the ingredients we use. And the idea is that all of that comes through in the beer itself. On the surface, if you're someone who doesn't like puns, you might have a hard time wrapping your brain around Shmaltz Brewing. But for the rest of us, we're trying to make craft beer a fun experience.

Q • People think Jews don't drink beer. Where did that notion come from, and what do you make of it?

A • For years, I've been thinking that should be our bumper sticker: "Jews Don't Drink Beer. Shmaltz Brewing Co." That stereotype is so prevalent, but I know for a fact it's not true. We're actually working on a second book right now, with a journalist in Brooklyn who has been doing some wonderful research about the history of Jews and beer, from ancient Mesopotamia to modern craft brewing. It's been a really fun process, digging up this history that shows how involved Jews were in Central and Eastern Europe in the beer trade. And now you can look at places like Asia, New Zealand and of course the United States, where tons of breweries have been started by Jews.