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Brewmaster

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

Beer is probably the oldest alcoholic beverage known to man. Evidence of beer brewing goes back to the dawn of recorded history: the Sumerians wrote about beer on stone tablets in their early alphabet, and there are references to the technical aspects of brewing beer dating from Egyptian times.

Garrett Oliver, 47, is the brewmaster for the Brooklyn Brewery, a regional brewery in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn that turns out 310,000 gallons of beer annually. A native of Queens, Garrett became interested in the finer points of beer consumption when he lived in London in the early 1980s. There he discovered pub-brewed beers that were very different from the “industrial-style” brews that he’d known in the United States. Back in the States, he started brewing his own beer at home, then went on to apprentice at the now-defunct Manhattan Brewery. Garrett worked his way up to head brewer, then began working at the Brooklyn Brewery. The Brooklyn Brewery began its on-site brewing operations in 1996, producing draft beer made “the way beer used to be brewed: in the old style, using traditional ingredients,” said Garrett.

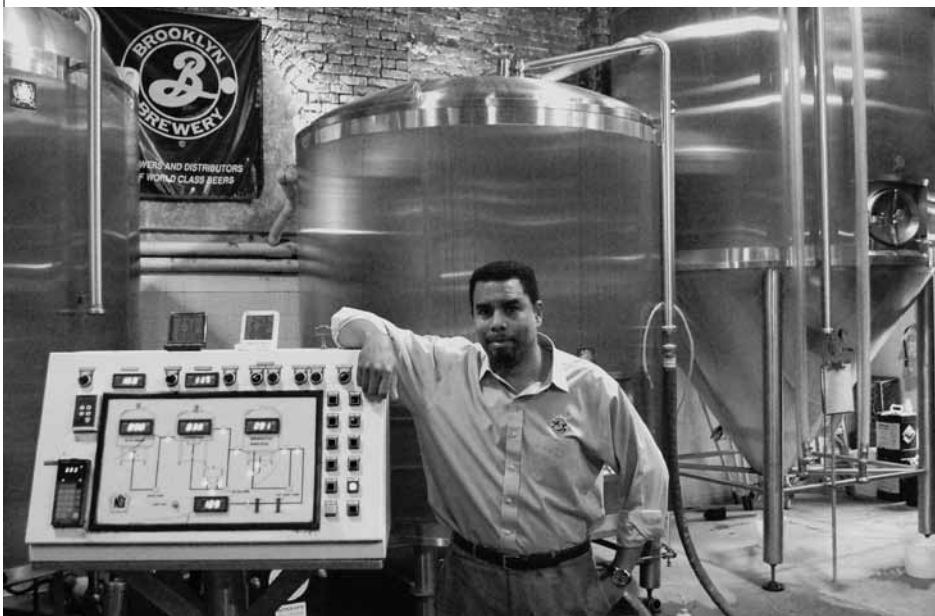
Garrett explained that Brooklyn was once a city of breweries: in 1900, the borough boasted 48 breweries, and 10 percent of all the beer brewed in the U.S. came from Brooklyn. At one point in the early twentieth century, Garrett said, Brooklyn produced more beer than Milwaukee. By the 1970s, however, there was only one brewery remaining in Brooklyn: Schaeffer, which shut down in 1976.

As brewmaster, Garrett is the “chef” of the brewery. He supervises the entire beer-brewing process, makes sure that the proper ingredients are used and that the flavor and quality are up to standards, and supervises the staff that run the brewery. He is responsible for overseeing all the recipes, procedures, and techniques that go into the brewing of Brooklyn Brewery’s products.

While the facility in Brooklyn brews the craft beers and ales—the specialty and seasonal brews—the large-scale beer production is done at Matt Brewing Company in Utica, New York. Brooklyn Brewery supplies its own malt, hops,

and yeast, and the upstate brewery turns out beer to Garrett’s specifications. According to Garrett, it wouldn’t be cost-effective for the Brooklyn facility to produce all of the beers and ales that make up the Brooklyn Brewery’s line.

Garrett took me on a tour of rooms with stainless steel vats, then across the street to one room where beer is aged in whiskey casks and to another where bottles of a small-run specialty ale are kept for several weeks in a temperature-controlled environment until they have matured enough to be ready for sale. In



the barrel room, the beer gets flavor from the wood, as well as oxygen that comes through the wood.

Just before they go to market, labels are put on these bottles, which have a European-style cork-and-bail closure. The Brooklyn Brewery label features a stylized capital “B” that evokes another era. It was designed by Milton Glaser, who is known for the famous “I Love New York” logo. The logo, which suggests the style of the long-vanished Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team, “evokes a lost past,” said Garrett.

The Brooklyn Brewery facilities, a sprawling complex of nineteenth-century industrial buildings, originally housed the Hecla Ironworks. Later, it became a matzoh bakery. When the Brooklyn Brewery took over the buildings, the floor of the brew house was covered with layers of hard, compacted matzoh dough that had to be painstakingly removed.

Garrett is something of a beer scholar, and he is doing his bit to make sure that the old techniques are available to new and future generations of brewers. He is the editor-in-chief of the *Oxford Companion to Beer*, and all of the recipes and techniques that are used in the Brooklyn Brewery are carefully recorded, so that nothing will be lost to posterity.

At the turn of the last century, there were 4,000 breweries in the United States. Currently, there are 1,500, many of which are small-production facilities. At the low point, in

1974, there were only forty breweries in operation, and the production of beer had largely become a high-volume industrialized process. “The brewery is actually going backwards,” said Garrett. “It’s now more artisanal than it was even five years ago. We are recreating old flavors and reviving old techniques that had largely disappeared from industrial brewing.”

The Brooklyn Brewery, and its brewmaster Garrett Oliver, are the modern-day custodians of a craft that goes back to time immemorial. ▼

Paul Margolis is a photographer, writer, and educator who lives in New York City. Examples of his work can be seen on his web site, www.paulmargolis.com.



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