



Jeff Erway, 31  
La Cumbre Brewing



Patrick Rue, 30  
The Bruery



Acacia Baldner, 22  
Student



Eric Rose, 35  
Hollister Brewing

# THE NEW CRAFT BREWERS

FROM NANOBREWERS TO FAST RISING STARS,  
HERE ARE 7 COMMITTED TO THE GOOD BEER CAUSE



Kevin Brand, 38  
(512) Brewing Co.



Michael Steffing, 26, and Jeffrey Stuffings, 32,  
Jester King Craft Brewery



Mike Spratley, 26  
Blue Pants Brewery

By Stan Hieronymus



he businesses that flank U.S. 290 west of Austin signal a transition from urban to rural as the highway heads west into Texas Hill Country. Of-

fices for dentists and investment counselors are interspersed with stores selling animal feed, power tools, and vitamins, as well as day schools and cafés. Turn north on to Fitzhugh Road and almost everything disappears.

Fortunately Jeffrey Stuffings, one of the founders of Jester King Craft Brewery, provided directions: “There’s a Chevron station on the corner. Drive 2.6 miles on Fitzhugh Road and a dirt/gravel driveway will be on your left. There’s a sign that says Ceres Park. Follow the driveway until you see a house and shed. You can then walk on foot through a gate, make a left and walk down a small hill to the brewery.”

The unlikely looking brewery occupies a building salvaged from Victoria, Texas—a machine shop from the 1920s constructed with Carnegie steel—and hauled to this 200-acre farm. Corrugated steel siding and a covered front porch make it look as much like something on a Mississippi cotton plantation as a brewery. All it lacks is Robert Johnson, a guitar in hand.

Within these walls, the 21st century meets the 19th. A shiny 30-barrel brewhouse is surrounded by wooden barrels, and Jeffrey and his brother Michael Steffing (he changed his name to the way his family previously spelled it long before he realized he’d be in business with his older brother) have built an adjoining cool room for still more barrels.

Their Jester King business plan has changed several times since Jeffrey, 32, was still practicing law and found himself obsessing about beer recipes. Michael, now 26, studied physics at the University of Chicago. Gone are thoughts of including, for instance, an American wheat beer in the portfolio. Today the brothers expect to eventually run every beer they sell through the barrels, with most exhibiting character fashioned by yeast grabbed from the Hill Country air. “Having our eyes opened to the world beyond *Saccharomyces*, there’s no turning back,” Stuffings said.

Jester King Craft  
Brewery, west of  
Austin, Texas.



The  
FUTURE of  
CRAFT  
BREWING

Fourteen miles away and only a couple blocks off U.S. 290 in South Austin, a small industrial park called Design Industry Center South looks more like the setting where scores, perhaps hundreds, of small breweries have started during the past 30 years. However, there are no signs, only letters on the doors. “You sure there is a brewery here?” my brother-in-law asks as he parks the car. He has his answer when we open the door to a 2,700-square-foot space totally filled by the brewery. A 30-barrel brewhouse is surrounded by 60-barrel fermenters, former bourbon barrels full of beer reside on a rack to the right, and cowboy boots sit atop bags of grain straight ahead.

In its second calendar year of operation (512) Brewing Co. doubled its sales, surpassing 2,500 barrels, all on draft. “I’m chomping at the bit to get the rest of the 8,000 feet (in the building his brewery occupies part of),” said founder-owner Kevin Brand.

He counts as a grizzled veteran these days in Austin. In 2000, Michael Jackson put Austin among America’s seven best beer cities, but when Brand began brewing beer in 2008, the famed Celis Brewery was long gone and many of the brewpubs Jackson had visited were as well. Live Oak Brewing and the relatively new Independence Brewing were the only distributing breweries in the city, although many consider the Real Ale Brewery, 50 miles away in Blanco, an Austin brewery.

Today there are eight to 20 breweries (“Depending on who you believe,” Brand said) that have recently opened in central Texas or expect to within the year. “I think it is good for me, if they are brewing good beer and releasing good beer,” he said. “As long as people take quality seriously, and they are talking like they do.”

Erin Glass, who tracks openings and closings for the Brewers Association, sees similar—if not quite as dramatic—trends across the country. “Every time I open my email or go to research a brewery, I end up finding two more,” she said. At the end of 2010, she counted 1,690 operating brick-and-mortar breweries, an increase of 144 from 2009 and easily the largest increase in 13 years. Additionally, active BA members had 311 breweries “in planning,” compared to 169 the year before.

#### MORE BREWERIES, MORE BREWERS

That’s a lot of new brewers, some of them newer than others, some with goals much the same as Greg Noonan had in 1988 when he opened Vermont Pub & Brewery, and some with business plans that would have seemed outlandish rather recently. It also wasn’t long ago that Allagash Brew-



Mike Spratley, 26, and his wife, Allison, started Blue Pants Brewery last year, one of three “nanobreweries” in the Huntsville, Ala. area.

ing founder Rob Tod tackled the question about who the “next generation” of brewers might be. “You could call us (brewers who entered the business in the mid-1990s) another generation, but you could also say we’re all part of the same generation with one wave after another,” he said.

#### CONSIDER THESE NEWCOMERS:

**Acacia Baldner**, 22 and a senior studying biochemistry at Southern Oregon University, is a brewer in waiting. Last summer she interned at Standing Stone Brewing Co., and she already has her spot reserved next year in the brewing program at the University of California at Davis. She began homebrewing with her father when she was in her teens, but remembers picking homegrown hops when she was much younger.

**Mike Spratley**, 26, is a brewer who couldn’t wait. He and his wife, Allison, started Blue Pants Brewery last year, one of three “nanobreweries” in the Huntsville, Ala. area.

**Patrick Rue**, 30, was supposed to be a lawyer by the fall of 1999. Instead he was, before The Bruery was even two years old, featured in *Draft* magazine in 2009 as one of “Nine Beer Innovators to Watch.” And Sam Calagione wrote the segment about Rue.

**Jeff Erway**, 31, began homebrewing when he lived on the Navajo Nation and was

teaching school in western New Mexico. He quickly became obsessed and almost immediately started talking about opening his own brewpub, but ended up being a brewer who waited. He graduated from the American Brewers Guild, won several brewing awards while he worked two years at Chama River Brewing in Albuquerque, then opened La Cumbre Brewing in December.

**Eric Rose**, 35 and co-owner of Hollister Brewing (established in 2007) outside of Santa Barbara, Calif., has already made some of the decisions that many starting brewers face. He’s a brewer’s brewer—stand aside at the Great American Beer Festival and watch how many other brewers stop by to sample his beers—more interested in exploring new beers (at least new to him and his customers) than new markets.

Rose says straight out what others imply: “I have my dream job.”

#### MAKING IT A CAREER

For Spratley, it’s half a dream so far. “I love brewing,” he said. “This is what I need to do to get the brewery I want to have. I can afford to wait because of my age.” His wife, Allison, handles the marketing at Blue Pants and he does the brewing. She’s “Blue” and he’s “Pants.” They both have full-time jobs, and plan to use whatever profits they make to expand the brewery. He’s an engineer and works for the Army, and she’s a school



Eric Rose, 35 and co-owner of Hollister Brewing outside of Santa Barbara, Calif.

teacher. He brews two days every two weeks and two 45-gallon batches each day he brews.

With the help of family, they did all the construction work needed to turn a 40-foot by 10-foot space they rent in the back of a warehouse into two rooms, one for brewing and the other for fermentation. Mike fabricated the brewery itself, using mostly equipment salvaged from a long-gone winery. He's already figured out how he can double his batch size once he has additional fermentation space. He'd like to expand again by 2012 and ultimately end up with a 10-barrel system.

He's happy to sell his beer close to home, resisting early offers to ship his beer to Birmingham. "I like the aspect of being able to babysit my beer," he said. "I can go to the bars and see how it is tasting."

He quickly found out why that mattered. "I kinda got arrogant," he said, sending kegs into the marketplace without tasting them. "I started getting phone calls. They described something that tasted like a bad Belgian beer." He visited the bars, apologized and either bought the kegs back or replaced them with fresh beer. He replaced a total of 11 kegs, nearly two weeks of output.

Not even dream jobs are easy. Two days before he served the first La Cumbre beer to a paying customer, Erway sat in the brewery's tap room and considered the year that had passed since he turned in his notice at

Chama River. "I would pay a few thousand dollars for one day off," he said wearily.

Twenty-four hours later, he'd be pouring beer at a preview party, smiling while listening to people tell him how great his beer is, looking a lot less tired. At the same time, he still remembered when he was a homebrewer and thinking about trying something he wasn't really prepared for. "I had many people tell me, 'You should open your own brewpub,'" he said. "I firmly believe until you are sitting in a cold room with your shoes wet, trying to move one keg on top of another, you can't understand what it's going to be like."

Those are the sorts of lessons Baldner learned last summer. "The first day, I found out if I could move kegs and grain bags," she said. She's 5-foot-8 and a climber, but she was much stronger at the end of the summer than in the beginning. By then she was also able to confidently handle the day-to-day chores that keep a brewery running. Now that school is in session, she still monitors the brewery if brewmaster Larry Chase has to be away.

"That would have been impossible when I started," she said. "The thing I had to learn was which valves to turn. It seemed like pipes were going everywhere and if you turned the wrong valve you had beer going down the drain."

When she completes the UC-Davis program, she plans to look for a brewing position

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in the Northwest, but that wouldn't be her dream job. "I want to start a brewpub," she said. "I like the R&D, to be able to create and make brewing an art beyond the science."

#### A NICHE WITHIN A NICHE

Given the amount of ink publications from *Playboy* to *Eqsuire* to the *New York Times* used describing The Bruery's beers in 2009 and 2010, sales of 2,300 barrels might seem pretty modest. That's fine with Rue. "Our focus is a little more narrow," he said. "We want flavorful beer that falls into a niche. I don't think that model would have worked 10 years ago."

With the addition of two more tanks in January, The Bruery pushed its capacity to 3,500 and expects to sell all of that in 21 states in 2011. There's no more room to grow without acquiring the property next door, although Rue plans to lease warehouse space that will increase capacity for barrel fermentation. "We'll be happy to grow in increments for 15, 20 years. We don't want to be huge," he said.

He started writing his business plan in 2005 after becoming obsessed—there's that word again—with homebrewing while he was in law school. "I definitely looked at Russian River and Lost Abbey and Allagash," he said. "I really like the focus those breweries have. I thought if I'm going to do something different, I don't have to be huge."

The Bruery has released scores of different beers, using such a wide range of ingredients that Calagione immediately labeled Rue a "kindred spirit," but Rue is proudest of the decision at the outset to commit to sour barrel-aged beers. He and head brewer Tyler King filled 40 used wine barrels in 2008. "Now they are starting to get released, some of the first batches," he said, pausing to savor the thought, "and they're pretty good." It gives the brewery the parts it needs to create even more beyond-the-norm beers. Very few will be released straight from individual barrels, Rue said.

Seasonals account for half of The Bruery's sales, with a beer called Mischief—a dry-hopped strong golden Belgian-inspired ale—the best single seller (17 percent of sales). "We don't all have to make 100,000 barrels. A lot of small players is a good thing," he said.

The names of Jester King's beers themselves echo that thought. The first release, Commercial Suicide Oaked Dark Mild, contains 3.3 percent alcohol by volume, with 30 percent of the blend aged in oak barrels. "We might sell a little beer in a lot of places," Michael said. After the brothers started firming their brewery plans, they met Ron Extract, the former national sales manager

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*I like the aspect of being able to babysit my beer. I can go to the bars and see how it is tasting.*

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—Mike Spratley, Blue Pants Brewery

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for Shelton Brothers importers who had recently moved to Texas, and he became a partner. He'll handle sales and marketing away from Austin, already targeting such far-flung markets as Chicago and Denmark.

Last spring Jeffrey and Michael built a mini-coolship, brewed a batch of wort and set it out in the Hill Country air. There are wineries, "here, here and here," Jeffrey said, pointing in different directions. "We thought there might be some good yeasts in the air." They sent what they collected to the Brewing Science Institute in Colorado, which then isolated a mixture that's theirs alone.

The brothers plan to sell three different strengths of farmhouse beers—all initially fermented with Wyeast 3711 (a French saison strain), then further fermented with their own wild yeast in wood. "We're proud of our *Saccharomyces* beers," Jeffrey said (an IPA that includes 15-percent rye in the recipe and three pounds of hops per barrel has found a receptive audience), "but in order to get the complexity and depth we want, you need the mixed fermentation."

"No one else is doing this down here. If there is going to be an evolution of beer in Texas, there has to be something new."

#### WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Long before Brand, 38, thought about opening (512), he was an engineering and chemistry student at the University of Texas. One day in the mid-1990s, he visited the relatively new Celis Brewery in Austin. "It dawned on me that beer could be brewed here, not just in St. Louis," he said. "Pierre Celis changed the way I thought about beer." It was a dozen years later, when he moved back to Austin from the West Coast, that he thought about starting a brewery.

One of the first beers he brewed was a wit, the style that Celis had resurrected in Belgium. Not long after (512) Brewing opened, Celis was back from Belgium to visit his daughter and stopped by (512) to try the wit. They discussed process details and Celis gave Brand's beer, made with grapefruit zest rather than orange peel like Celis White, his stamp of approval.

It might be nice to report that (512) Wit is Brand's bestselling beer, but his IPA accounts for 35 percent of sales and Pecan

Porter, a robust black beer made with locally grown and roasted pecans, 25 percent. Pecans were a natural choice because the trees are everywhere in central Texas. There's even one in front of the brewery. "Most of the people who support us are in love with Austin and in love with Texas," Brand said.

The regulars at Hollister Brewing also consume mostly hop-oriented beers, and Rose has won several awards for IPAs and Double IPA. But because he keeps 14 or more beers on tap and makes 40 to 50 different ones when he wants to wander off on a different path, he can.

Last fall, a beer he called Tiny Bubbles, as delightful a Leipziger Gose—a once extinct style still barely brewed in Germany—as you'll find, won a silver medal at the Great American Beer Festival. It was the slowest selling beer he ever put on tap. In December he had 440 pounds of malted wheat smoked over oak so he could brew a Grätzer (or Grodziski, depending upon where it was brewed), another European style that has pretty much vanished.

Tasting the smoky, highly hopped, low alcohol beer before it was ready to serve, he questioned how it would be received. "To the modern palate, this is an odd pairing of flavors," he said, suggesting he couldn't imagine many customers enjoying the beer. He said that without expressing regret. "If we only sell 1,000 pints, that's 1,000 people who will try something they haven't tried before," he said. "I learned a ton (making it)."

He understands that's the luxury of brewing at the pub level, and on a 10-barrel system, made even easier when you are co-owner. "I have no restrictions," he said. "I see my customers every day. They look me in the eye every day."

The brewer of tomorrow needn't be much different than the brewer of yesterday. Erway doesn't want to be. "I'm not one for throwing oddball ingredients in beer. I'm pretty much a traditionalist," he said, turning "tradition" into a relative notion. Not that many years ago his various IPAs would have been barrier breakers. Now the 7.5 percent Elevation IPA, which is packed with hop flavor and intense bitterness, accounts for more than half of his sales.

"I brew styles and I try to brew them the best I can," Erway said. "I guess it's an old route."

Perhaps an old route, but often on a new road.

**Stan Hieronymus is the author of *Brewing with Wheat: The Wit and Weizen of World Wheat Beer Styles*. He blogs at [www.appellationbeer.com/blog](http://www.appellationbeer.com/blog).** ■