

Beer Festivals from the Other Side

Story and photo by Brad Probert

If you're reading these pages, you've probably been to a beer festival or two. They're one of the great by-products of the craft beer revolution. Before craft beer exploded with beer styles and breweries to choose from, they're wasn't really a need to bring together multiple breweries to allow beer drinkers to explore their beer varieties. The brewery choices were limited, and realistically they didn't all taste that different from each other. But now there is a purpose for such events for the beer consumer.

The logic is simple for the beer drinker, but the brewers have other things to consider. Being on the other side of the beer table under the festival tent brings with it a different perspective. As a brewer, these events mean work. There are decisions to be made on what beer to bring, and what equipment is needed to deliver the beer and make the table a useful marketing vessel to a crowd of potential customers. They need people to work it, and that means scheduling, paying someone for their time and expenses, particularly if an overnight stay is involved. While the 3-tier Michigan beer distribution laws don't allow a brewery to directly provide beer themselves to the consumer, they still need brewery staff on hand during events. They need someone in their tent with the right knowledge to answer questions from inquisitive beer fans, and deal with the equipment being used to distribute the beer to the line of people looking for their sample.

There are a multitude of reasons why breweries participate in festivals, and not all breweries approach them the same way. The main reasons they participate in events like the Michigan Brewers Guild annual festivals is



because they're a part of the Michigan brewing community, and they want to support and promote Michigan beer. But festivals also provide opportunities to get brand recognition within the target customer market of craft beer fans. Finally, sometimes festivals are used for market testing a new beer. Dan Scarsella from **Motor City Brewing Works** says that to gauge customer opinion, "We listen to people talking about the beer, listen if they came based on a recommendation from a friend for a particular beer, or we even just watch their reactions as they take a drink." And of course long lines are a good sign of a hot product, too.

Short's B.C. is one Michigan brewery that's big on festivals. So big in fact that they have a dedicated festival team, and it even has its own piece of real estate- known as "Beer Camp"- just southeast of Bellaire. At Beer Camp, the Festivals and Events team stores their big event serving displays, builds and creates new ones, and uses it as a base of operations for keeping general festival gear organized and ready to deploy to the next event. Todd Gyulveszi is the Festival & Events Manager for Short's, and he told me, "Joe [Short] loves parties. He created this group specifically so we can do parties and festivals right." Todd explained that they approach the events truly with the "beer liberator" mindset. They love engaging with the public and educating the consumer about their products, and especially some of the newer festivals where they're able to meet someone who's new to craft beer altogether.

To further explore this look at festivals from the other side of things, I decided to volunteer at one. With the plethora of offerings over the summer months, there were many to

choose from. Almost all festival web pages have a link for volunteers, but not all volunteer opportunities are created equal. Some want you to work the whole festival, which effectively nullifies the benefit of getting in for free. Some make you still pay a small fee to get in as a volunteer. Some don't work you the whole time and let you in for free, but don't give you any drink tokens. Upon further research, I found the Goldilocks of festival volunteer opportunities with the Lansing Summer Beer Festival in REO Town. I only had to sign up for half of the festival, got in free, and got the same drink tokens as a general admission ticket.

I got assigned a role of pouring beer for Short's, alongside another volunteer. It was a great experience. Everyone we talked with while pouring beer was polite, friendly, and in a good mood, of course. People naturally thought we were brewery employees and would give us compliments on whatever their favorite Short's beer was or how they enjoyed visiting the brewery. Naturally, we took the compliments in stride, but directed any tough questions to the sales rep that was there. It was a great way to enjoy the beer festival at a reduced cost, meet and talk to a lot of people, and feel like a part of the Michigan beer community. I highly recommend it to anyone, but be sure to get all the details of what exactly your volunteer session entails.

No research on this topic would be complete without discovering the secret behind those tokens they collect. The subject of much speculation and rumor at each festival I've attended is what the breweries do with them when the festival is over. I found out that they don't count them for the honor of bragging rights, and they don't turn them in for money/payment from the festival organizers. They actually just turn them in and dump them in a big bucket to get used again next time. Mystery solved. **MBG**

