

## MICHIGAN BEER GUIDE

### Brewery Retailer Collaborations

Brad Probert

The craft beer market is jammed with options. A walk down the beer aisle in any supermarket or liquor store clearly illustrates this, as well as the fact you can probably name at least 5 different bars that you've been to that have 20+ taps. Breweries are trying to find ways to make their beer stand out from others on the shelf, and retailers are also trying to lure in the craft beer buyers to their particular store. There are many different methods they use to make this happen, but there have been some recent methods used that partner brewer and retailer in an effort to get noticed by the beer shopper.

Busch's Market recognized the importance of the craft beer segment, and it has been actively working to establish themselves as a go-to place for craft beer. As a Michigan-owned grocery with all stores in the Southeast Michigan area, they know what it means to support Michigan-made products and think locally. They take pride in promoting



Michigan products in their stores, and John Hunter, Busch's Market Director of Marketing, noted that they carry 4,000 Michigan-made products in their stores.

John noted that they support local vendors and local farmers even if they only have enough produce to support just one store. With this local mindset combined with a drive to increase focus on their craft beer sales, they decided a specially-made beer crafted exclusively for distribution at Busch's stores would be a great project.

Over the summer they teamed up with **Short's Brewing** to get a version of their Local's Light uniquely hopped and distributed only through Busch's. With that successful initial venture behind them, they looked for another partner, and thought of **Dark Horse**. John said, "With their openness and laid back attitude, we thought they'd be open to it. And they were." Thus, the Fall 2016 seasonal exclusive came into being: Joe's Neighborhood Dry-Hopped American Amber Ale.

Bryan Wiggs, Dark Horse Brewing Production Facility Manager, worked with

Busch's on Joe's Neighborhood. Busch's approached them about the idea, and Dark Horse was on board. The Dark Horse team wanted to make something they'd never made before, and they started by thinking of the customer base they would be appealing to with this Busch's partnership. They came up with the idea of making an American Amber as it is a well-balanced beer which would make it appealing to the casual supermarket shopper that was maybe new to craft beer. But, they wanted something more. As Bryan describes it, "At Dark Horse we like to make things a little bit bigger than it should be." So they added dry hopping to give it that extra push into something special, but also conscious that the words "dry hopped" on the label would catch the eye of hop heads out there and maybe likewise introduce them to a new style of beer. Bryan added that keeping with the Michigan local theme, all the hops used were Michigan grown.

Similar to Busch's trying to grow their craft beer sales, Dark Horse has been putting effort into growing their sales in retail chains like Busch's. They even brought in a VP of Sales to help focus efforts on that. Busch's noted the attention is paying off as they've




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seen a 25% increase in sales of Dark Horse beers this year as compared to last. Bryan noted that this type of brewer and retailer connection is something they like to develop. He added, "Some breweries don't care where it goes, as long as it leaves the dock." At Dark Horse, they appreciate having a relationship with retailers as it helps them better connect to the end customers.

For Joe's Neighborhood, Dark Horse's distributor Rave Associates was fully supportive. Bryan said, "After telling them about the project, they asked what we needed them to do. Pick it up and drop it off." Rave said OK. The beer was packed on a Wednesday, Rave picked it up Thursday, and it was in stores on Friday. Just 80 barrels of it were bottled, plus a few kegs to have at the Dark Horse tap room. So by the time you're reading this, you might have a hard time finding it on Busch's shelves.

Another kind of brewery & retailer partnership goes on at **Draught Horse Brewery** in New Hudson. They have a program they call "Brew 4 U." With it, customers can collab-

orate with the brewery on making their own beer for their bar/restaurant/club. Most customers tend toward some version of a hoppy Pale Ale or lighter IPA, but they do get requests for more unique brews like a chocolate cherry brown ale they made for a company or a Rosemary IPA they made for a wedding last



January.

Draught Horse currently makes about 750 barrels a year, staying below the Michigan self-distribution limit and thus manages all of these relationships with end clients directly. The clients range from country clubs and restaurants, to individuals coming in and brewing their special beer for their wedding reception.

Typical batches are small, about 4-5 kegs, depending on the size of the establishment, but the brewery has 2 brew systems (one 10 bbl, and one 3 bbl) which allows them to keep a focus on the mainstream taproom business while still supporting the small batch Brew 4 U business.

Brad Tiernan, Draught Horse Brewery Founder, explained, "Our Brew 4 U program predates the opening of the taproom. This specific niche has helped differentiate Draught Horse Brewery from the heavy volume of opening breweries in the past years." Currently, the program accounts for about 5% of sales, but now with the 10 bbl and 3 bbl systems both operating, they expect to increase that to 20%.

These pairings of brewer and retailer allow for some unique collaborations and offer another avenue of getting new beers into the market from some of your favorite establishments. Brewers appreciate being able to interact with the retailers, and retailers like being able to offer something unique to their customers to help them stand out in the crowded craft beer market. **MBG**

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