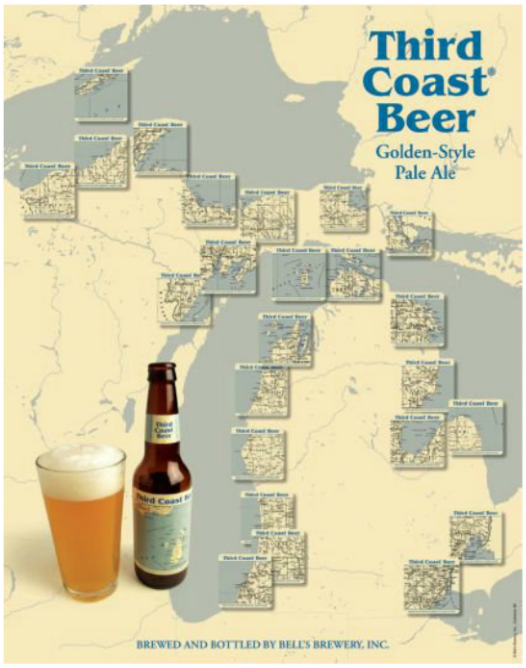
Beer Labels

By Brad Probert



Although it's just a piece of paper with glue on the back of it, the beer bottle label is a very complex beast. It serves its major purpose as a miniature billboard, trying to draw you in while you're studying the shelves at your favorite beer store. Although sometimes we seek out a specific beer based on its reputation or referral from a friend, there's always a time when we find ourselves browsing for something new to try out. And that's when it's time for the label to do its job.

But if you dig deeper, the label brings with it a lot of legal baggage.

In 1987, **Coors** took on 'The Man' in a major legal battle that had to be settled by the U.S. Supreme Court. Back in 1935, a Federal law was passed that prohibited brewers from putting the alcohol content on their beer. The rationale for it was to prevent breweries from engaging in "strength wars." That stood until 1987 when Justice Clarence Thomas delivered the opinion of the court that basically said that although "strength wars" is something the government should protect the public from, putting the ABV on the label isn't going to incite such chaos. Who would've thought The Silver Bullet would be going to bat to strike down a law meant to prevent a commercial throwdown wreaking havoc on people's livers as brewers ratcheted up the alcohol percentage?

In 1993, **Yakima Brewing** of Washington fell into trouble with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF). The owner of the brewery, Bert Grant, decided to start putting nutrition information on 6-packs of his Grant's Scottish Ale. Unfortunately for him, providing the nutritional analysis on beer was actually illegal based on a 1954 regulation interpretation by the BATF that "any reference to vitamin content in the advertising of malt beverages would mislead a substantial number of persons to believe that consumption of the product would produce curative or therapeutic effects." Bert vocally protested this and garnered much public attention, but this also seemingly attracted additional scrutiny from the BATF. Other obscure rulings came down on Yakima Brewing from the BATF forcing a re-labeling of their Spiced Ale after being on the market for years because the name was too "frivolous." They also had their cider re-classified as a wine by BATF, forcing higher taxes (including back taxes for the 10 years it had been in production). The BATF denied any linkage. Bert sold the brewery in 1995.

In 2003, the BATF was re-organized such that firearms, alcohol & tobacco smuggling, and explosives were handled under a branch within the Justice Department, and the Alcohol and Tobacco Trade and Tax Bureau (TTB) was formed under the Treasury Department. In 2013, the TTB somewhat vindicated Grant, allowing minimal nutritional information such as calories and carbs be put on beer labels, but still prohibiting any information on vitamin content- lest people get confused and think beer is good for you, I guess. So if Grant were still alive (he died in 2001), or if his brewpub were still open (closed in 2005), he still wouldn't be able to tell people that a bottle of his Scottish Ale contained 170% of the recommended daily allowance of Vitamin B12.

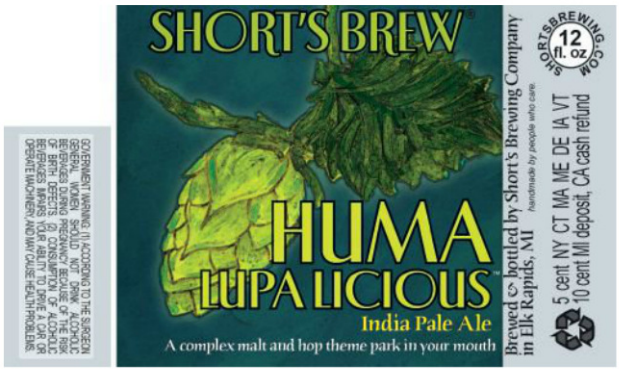
However, it's not only the Federal Government that has its say on beer labels. The Michigan Liquor Control Commission banned **Flying Dog** from selling their Belgian IPA, Raging Bitch, in Michigan in 2009, but changed their minds two years later. The Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control Board initially banned **Founder's** Dirty Bastard from being sold there, expressing concern about children being exposed to profanity while shopping with their parents in the grocery store. Luckily, that only stayed in place for 3 months before they reversed their initial aversion to the name.

Talking to Laura Bell (Vice President, **Bell's Brewery**), she said Bell's has never had a label rejected by the TTB for being inappropriate, although there have been minor corrections needed for a technical aspect or choice of words. When coming up with their label art, they don't follow any prescribed process: "Each beer is unique, has a different reason for being. The label is created to reflect that." When asked about the wide range of label styles, she said, "Bell's has been around for 30 years. Labels are reflective of the time they're developed. We do what feels right for each beer." And with only minor exception the labels remain unchanged from their original debut. Perhaps the most unique of Bell's labels is the one for Third Coast Beer, where 24 different labels show different stretches of Michigan's coastline, all of them together mapping out all 3,288 miles.

Gillian Cobb (Communications, **Short's Brewing Co.**) describes their label creation process as "mostly spontaneous, although there are usually a few beers consumed while brainstorming. It's more of an organic process than a calculated, set process that is followed each time." She notes that when they create a new beer, the topic of what it should be called and what the label should look like becomes a hot topic around the brewery, with everyone taking a shot at coming up with a winner. The label art starts as black and white sketches, and then moves on to color once the right feel is captured. After being drawn and colored by hand, it gets digitized to be processed for the actual labels. You can see here the evolution of the Huma Lupa Licious label.

In the end, despite all the laws on what brewers can and can't say or show on their label, it's still first and foremost their opportunity to send a message to you, the consumer. It doesn't necessarily tell you what the beer will taste like, but if you connect to the message or feeling the brewer is trying to convey, you might get a glimpse of what that beer means to them. Or you can forget about all of that and just pick the one with the prettiest colors!

MBG


SHORT'S BREW
HUMA
LUPA LICIOUS
India Pale Ale
A complex malt and hop theme park in your mouth
Brewed & bottled by Short's Brewing Company in Elk Rapids, MI
handmade by people who care
SHORTSBREWING.COM
12 fl. oz
5 cent NY CT MA ME DE IA VT
10 cent MI deposit, CA cash refund
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