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Hawai'i's Beers and Brewers

ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES HAVE BEEN COMMON in Hawai'i for two centuries. Among precontact Hawaiians, the only known substance approximating an intoxicant was dried 'awa root, which, mixed with water, made a drink which was more narcotic than intoxicating in its effects. The first alcoholic drinks to appear were rum and grog, introduced by European visitors in the 1790s and distilled locally by 1802. Beer has been brewed in Hawai'i off and on at least since 1812. The earliest wine from Hawai'i dates from 1815. Sake, initially imported from Japan, was produced in the Islands from 1908 through 1992.¹

Hawai'i's first recorded brewer was Francisco de Paula Marin, a Spaniard who settled in Honolulu around 1793 or 1794. An entry in Marin's diary dated 2 February 1812 notes his making "a barrel of beer." On 7 December 1815, he wrote: "This day I made a little oil and a barrel of beer for Captain Tela [Tyler]."²

What appears to have been the earliest commercial brewery in Hawai'i was announced in the government's weekly newspaper, *The Polynesian*, on 15 April 1854. A one-column advertisement read:

HONOLULU BREWERY.—*Genuine Beer*—The undersigned, having established a Brewery [*sic*] in Honolulu, Fort street, opposite the French Hotel, are now prepared to supply families, hotels, boarding houses and bar rooms, in bottles or in kegs.

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This Beer is made of barley and hops only,—contains no alcohol, nor any ingredient whatever injurious to health,—can be recommended to the public as the best and most wholesome beverage ever made on these islands, and we hope, therefore, to obtain the favor of public patronage.

All orders will be punctually attended to. Captains and passengers will be accommodated at the shortest notice. J. J. BISCHOFF & CO.³

Similar ads appeared weekly for the next thirty-three months. On 28 October 1854, a new heading—HONOLULU BREWERY MALT BEER—replaced the earlier one, and the second paragraph of the original notice—the one describing the beer’s nonalcoholic content—disappeared. This ad ran through 20 December 1856. The final Honolulu Brewery ad, published from 27 December 1856 to 17 January 1857, offered the brewery for sale.⁴

What role competition from imported beers played in the failure of Bischoff’s brewery is unclear. Since 1837, Honolulu newspapers had regularly carried advertisements, placed by Peirce & Brewer and other merchants, for beers (chiefly imported ale, porter, and stout) sold by them.⁵ Mid-century data on ale and beer imports at the port of Honolulu, unfortunately limited to a single year, 1843, reveal surprisingly modest annual totals for what was then deemed one of the liveliest ports in the Pacific: only thirty-five cases, twenty barrels, sixty-nine casks, and twenty dozens. In 1872, when statistical reporting resumed, duty was paid on ten barrels, sixteen kegs, thirty-six hogsheads, and 11,621 dozens (pints, quarts, gallons) of ale, beer, and porter.⁶

The local production of beer languished for the next eight years, until its revival under Thos. W. Warren and Willard H. Francis in March 1865. Hawaiian Beer, as it was named, was a lager offered to hotels, saloons, and families in casks, kegs, and bottles.⁷

The Warren and Francis partnership apparently lasted less than four months: in July, Warren began running weekly ads for his Oahu Brewery (location unspecified), describing its lager beer and XX Ale made with “the co-operation of that eminent and favorite brewer, Mr. C. Hug.” Francis, now in sole charge of the Hawaiian Brewery in Nu‘uanu Valley, eventually decided to leave the kingdom and in

December 1865 (asserting the facility to be “in complete order and successful operation”) offered it for sale. Uncertain of the expertise possessed by potential buyers, Francis promised them “full instructions in the art of Brewing.”⁸

The Oahu Brewery had its own problems. In February 1866, Warren advertised for “a No. 1 Brewer,” adding, “Having been already deceived by some calling themselves Brewers, only a man well recommended need apply.” Warren eventually discontinued his Oahu Brewery advertisements, replacing them with ads for his Honolulu Distillery, which he described as “this pioneer establishment, which is now in full operation” with “a supply of various kinds of spirits in bond.” What finally became of either brewery remains unknown.⁹

Local beer apparently remained unavailable from then until 1888. On 10 January that year, the editor of the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* reported: “Yesterday afternoon we received a five gallon keg of beer, the first brewing of the National Brewing Company. . . . [It was] a superior article. . . .” Three months later, a newspaper advertisement stated:

The National Brewery! Kalihi Valley, Is now one of the Permanently Established Industries of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and the Company to whose Enterprise the Existence is due have for the first time solved the problem of Brewing in this Country a Pure, Wholesome, Palatable B-E-E-R. It was predicted at the outset that THE STEAM BEER of the National Brewery Co. Would soon find favor in the Community after it had been given a trial. In the course of a few short months the prediction has been amply realized. THE STEAM BEER of the National Brewery Co. Is fast supplanting the imported article in popular favor. It is sold in KEGS ranging from FIVE GALLONS and upwards. ALSO IN BOTTLES. . . . GILBERT WALLER, Manager.¹⁰

(Gilbert Waller should not be confused with his nephew, Gilbert J. Waller. Although Gilbert J. was apparently misidentified by the 1892 directory as the proprietor of the National Brewery, he was actually known as president of both the Anti-Saloon League of Hawaii and the Temperance League of Hawaii and also as a senior elder of the Reorganized Church of Latter-day Saints.¹¹)

Like earlier Hawai‘i-brewed beers, National lasted only a few years.

Hawai'i's fifth beer, and the one to survive the longest, was Primo Lager. Manufactured by the Honolulu Brewing and Malting Company, Ltd., in a large brick brewery built on Queen Street between Punchbowl and South Streets in 1900, the new brand made its first public appearance, both in draught and bottled form, on 13 February 1901. Apparently a companion beer, Wurzburger, was also offered at one time by the company.¹²

Several mainland brewers operated bottling works in Honolulu during the early part of the twentieth century. The 1900–1901 city directory, for example, listed three “brewing agencies” (referred to as “bottlers” in later editions) as well as one “brewery,” Primo. The Seattle Brewing & Malting Company and its Rainier Bottling Works were annually listed in the pre–World War I directories, then again after the repeal of Prohibition. Available information unfortunately fails to specify the exact function of these bottlers. Whether they were actually brewers, bottlers of beer shipped to Hawai'i in bulk, or merely wholesale distributors of the mainland product is unclear.¹³

Primo prospered until the arrival of Prohibition: 10 April 1918 on O'ahu, 20 August 1918 on the Neighbor Islands. Prohibition's early appearance in Hawai'i resulted from a presidential executive order and an act of Congress, urged by local business leaders as wartime measures. The Eighteenth Amendment did not take effect nationally until 16 January 1920.¹⁴

A fourteen-year dry spell imposed by national Prohibition followed World War I. Bootleggers and homebrew helped to fill the void, in spite of the best efforts of law enforcement officers.¹⁵

After repeal, approved 5 December 1933, brewing quickly (and legally) returned to the Island scene. The American Brewing Company, organized in December 1933, occupied the old Primo Brewery at 549 South Queen Street. Primo, now manufactured by the Hawaii Brewing Corporation, Ltd., was produced in a new structure at Kapiolani Boulevard and Cooke Street, described when it opened in May 1934 as “the first brewery to be completely constructed west of the Rockies since before prohibition.”¹⁶

Beer from the American Brewing Company was the first local brew to reach the market, with Pale Ambrew draught beer initially offered on 9 April 1934. Four days later the company urged customers to

“watch for the announcement of Ambrew in bottles—coming soon.” Two versions were sold, a 3.2-percent beer for military personnel and a regular beer for civilians. Ambrew was described as “fully aged—full strength—healthful—delicious” and even “non-fattening.” Eventually, Honolulu grocers began to advertise Ambrew weekend specials, at \$1.85 for a case of twenty-four eleven-ounce bottles.¹⁷

The new Primo was introduced 2 May 1934 at an open house held at Primo's new Cooke Street brewery. “Its generous size is an old-time tradition . . . full 16 ounces in every bottle,” read the advertising copy, adding that three such bottles came to only fifty cents.¹⁸

Ambrew, never very popular with Island beer drinkers, was discontinued late in 1937 and replaced by a new brand, Royal. The new label was considerably more successful than Ambrew, surviving until 1962.¹⁹

Primo, Ambrew, and Royal dominated Hawaiian beer brands, but they were not the only brands brewed locally during the post-repeal years. The American Brewing Company in its earliest days reportedly produced a little known and short-lived brand called Von Zart Beer.²⁰ An ad for Primo published in December 1934 included a boxed blurb for a companion product: “HULA BREW is known as ‘The Beer with the Aloha Lei.’ If you can't come to Hawaii, order a case of ‘Hula Brew.’ There are 24 bottles in the case. This is a distinctive Hawaiian package and each bottle makes a delightful souvenir.”²¹ Paradise Beer, a private label sold by the C. Q. Yee Hop Market in 1937, was brewed by the American Brewing Company.²² So was Royal Ale, advertised during the late 1930s.²³ A newspaper reference to a local beer supposedly called Brewers' Best cannot be substantiated.²⁴

Labor unrest marked the late 1930s. Primo workers were fully organized by July 1937, followed soon afterward by employees of the American Brewing Company and the agencies for Rainier and Acme beers. A strike was called 22 December 1938 and ran fifty-two days before settlement, with the final agreement noticeably improving workers' conditions.²⁵

The onset of World War II caused considerable stress among brewers in the territory. By order of the military governor, no alcoholic beverages were sold between 7 December 1941 and 23 February 1942. Thereafter, bars were allowed to open only a few hours a day,

and civilians were limited to purchases of only one bottle of liquor (or one gallon of wine or one case of beer) per week.²⁶ Shipments of mainland brands were infrequent, and the two Island breweries worked overtime to meet the heavy demand, their annual sales in 1943 reaching 1.5 million cases of beer worth \$4 million. Quality inevitably declined, and one editor noted near the end of the war that “few persons will admit they actually like the local product.”²⁷ After V-J Day, matters gradually returned to normal.

In October 1958, Primo became the first brewery in the nation to market beer in an aluminum can. Despite a large promotional campaign, the eleven-ounce “Shiny Steiny” did not receive the public acceptance hoped for.²⁸

Royal, Primo’s only local competitor, meanwhile was struggling to keep afloat. In 1960, a mainland brewmaster and consultant was brought in and a \$250,000 modernization plan calling for an improved Royal beer and a new brand, Tops, was prepared. Both Tops and Royal Premium were indeed advertised in the 1961 and 1962 telephone book yellow pages, although the “Premium” apparently differed little from regular Royal. Sometime in 1962, American Brewing, like so many small breweries at this time, ceased production.²⁹

Primo likewise encountered difficulty during the 1960s. The Jos. Schlitz Brewing Company acquired the Hawaii Brewing Company from its parent firm, Beatrice Foods Company of Chicago, late in 1963, effective 31 December. In July 1966, the new owners moved Primo production to a newly built facility in Waimalu near Pearl Harbor. Schlitz, Schlitz Light, and Schlitz Malt Liquor were also brewed at the new plant. Sales, poor when Schlitz assumed control, quickly recovered but eventually proved inadequate to ensure profitability. On 15 May 1979, Schlitz shipped the last cases of Hawai‘i-brewed Primo and transferred production to its Los Angeles plant.³⁰

The departure of Primo marked the end of large-scale brewing in Hawai‘i. Several microbreweries and brewpubs have tried to fill the gap, but with mixed results. The first Island microbrewery was one operated by Pacific Brewing Company at Wailuku, manufacturing Maui Lager, from 21 July 1986 until its demise in November 1990.³¹ A 1996 survey reported five microbreweries, seven brewpubs, and one contract brewer in the state, offering fifteen separate beers—probably an all-time high.³²

Primo meanwhile continues to be available at Island liquor stores and supermarkets, still sporting colorful Hawaiian motifs on its label. An inconspicuous notation on this label states, "Brewed by the Stroh Brewing Co., Detroit, Michigan."

NOTES

This is a revised version of a paper presented at a microbrewery seminar at Chaminade University of Honolulu, 5 October 1996.

- ¹ Robert C. Schmitt, "Okole Maluna," *PP* Nov. 1952: 22-24; Robert C. Schmitt and Ronn Ronck, *Firsts and Almost Firsts in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1995) 226-29.
- ² Ross H. Gast and Agnes C. Conrad, *Don Francisco de Paula Marin* (Honolulu: UP of Hawaii, 1973) 204, 218.
- ³ *P* 15 Apr. 1854: 195.
- ⁴ *P* 22 Apr. 1854-17 Jan. 1857.
- ⁵ See, for example, *SIG* 21 June 1837 and 12 Aug. 1837 and *P* 21 Apr. 1855.
- ⁶ *F* 1 June 1844: 56; Collector-General of Customs, *Custom House Statistics, Hawaiian Islands*, 1872 11.
- ⁷ *PCA* 4 Mar. 1865: [2].
- ⁸ *PCA* 15 July 1865: [2]; *PCA* 23 Dec. 1865: [3].
- ⁹ *PCA* 10 Feb. 1866: [2]; *PCA* 24 Mar. 1866: [2]. Stephen C. Gould brought references 7, 8, and 9 to my attention.
- ¹⁰ *PCA* 10 Jan. 1888: 3; *PCA* 13 Apr. 1888: 3.
- ¹¹ *Directory and Hand-Book of the Kingdom of Hawaii [1892]* (San Francisco: F. M. Husted, 1892) 192, 226; *PCA* 6 Feb. 1908: 1; John William Siddall, ed., *Men of Hawaii* (Honolulu: Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Ltd., 1921) 2: 403; *HA* 13 Jan. 1935: 9.
- ¹² George Mellen, "Brew and brewmasters," *The Sales Builder*, Aug. 1940, 3, 12; *PCA* 13 Feb. 1901: 1, 2; *PCA* 1 July 1901: 9; *HA* 26 Jan. 1979: A-1.
- ¹³ See the Honolulu directories for 1900-1901 (p. 716), 1912 (p. 1088), 1915 (p. 1063), and 1935-36 (p. 710). For a picture of the Rainier Bottling Works, see *PP* Dec. 1906: 70. For more on beer bottles, see Rex R. Elliott and Stephen C. Gould, *Hawaiian Bottles of Long Ago*, rev. ed. (Honolulu: Hawaiian Service, Inc., 1988) 67, 187-89.
- ¹⁴ Schmitt, "Okole Maluna" 23; Clarence L. Hodge and Peggy Ferris, *Building Honolulu* (Honolulu: Chamber of Commerce of Honolulu, 1950) 33; *Encyclopedia Americana* (Danbury, CT: Grolier, 1995) 22: 646-48.
- ¹⁵ Mellen, "Brew and brewmasters" 13; *HSB* 25 Feb. 1967: A-5.
- ¹⁶ Mellen, "Brew and brewmasters" 13; Jack Boyer, "Golden Amber," *HA* 9 Jan. 1955: Mag., 6-8; *HA* 2 May 1934: 4.
- ¹⁷ *HA* 8 Apr. 1934: 5; *HA* 10 Apr. 1934: 4; *HA* 12 Apr. 1934: 3; *HSB* 14 Apr. 1934: 12; *HA* 7 Dec. 1934: 9; *HA* 18 May 1934: 3; *HA* 9 July 1937: 13.
- ¹⁸ *HA* 2 May 1934: 4; *HA* 11 May 1934: 10.

- ¹⁹ *Polk-Husted Directory Co.'s Directory of City and County of Honolulu and the Territory of Hawaii 1938-39* (Honolulu, 1938), spine; Mellen, "Brew and brewmasters" 14; Boyer, "Golden Amber" 6; *SSB&A* 3 Mar. 1968: B-5.
- ²⁰ Mellen, "Brew and brewmasters" 14.
- ²¹ *PP* Dec. 1934, unpagged ad.
- ²² *HA* 9 July 1937: 13; *HSB* 7 Oct. 1937: 15; *HA* 3 Dec. 1937: 12; Dick Chun, C. Q. Yee Hop & Co., interview by Schmitt, 9 Sept. 1996.
- ²³ See, for example, the Polk-Husted Honolulu directories for 1938-39, 1939-40, and 1940-41, ads on the spines.
- ²⁴ *HA* 26 Jan. 1979, A1.
- ²⁵ John E. Reinecke, "The History of Brewery Workers Union of Hawaii, Local 502" (draft in U of Hawai'i Library).
- ²⁶ Gwenfread Allen, *Hawaii's War Years 1941-1945* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1950) 356-58; Schmitt, "Okole Maluna" 24.
- ²⁷ *HA* 8 July 1944: 5; Boyer, "Golden Amber" 7; Eileen O'Brien, "A Toast to 'Imitation,'" *PP* Feb. 1945: 33-34.
- ²⁸ "First Aluminum Beer Cans," *Hawaii Industry* Oct. 1958: 28-29; *Sunday Star-Bulletin* 4 Sept. 1960, Sports sec., 5; William F. Hosford and John L. Duncan, "The Aluminum Beverage Can," *Scientific American* Sept. 1994: 48.
- ²⁹ *Sunday Star-Bulletin* 3 Apr. 1960: Home and Business sec., 6; GTE Hawaiian Tel, O'ahu telephone directories for 1961 (yellow pages, 81) and 1962 (yellow pages, 82); Dick Chun, interview. A 1960 closing was erroneously reported in Historic Buildings Task Force, *Old Honolulu* (Honolulu, 1969), bldg. 25, and *HSB* 5 Apr. 1993: A-4. A 1961 closing was incorrectly reported in *HA* 31 Aug. 1984: A3; *Historic Hawai'i News* Dec. 1984: 1; and *SSB&A* 26 Dec. 1986: C-5.
- ³⁰ *HA* 4 Nov. 1963: A-4; *HA* 12 Sept. 1964: B-1; *HA* 18 Jan. 1966: A-8; *HA* 1 June 1966: B8; *HA* 26 Jan. 1979: A1; *HA* 17 May 1979: B-11.
- ³¹ *SSB&A* 24 Aug. 1986: B-5; *HSB* 27 Nov. 1986: I-1; *HA* 9 Nov. 1990: A9.
- ³² *Beer World Brewery Database: Hawaii*, <http://global.com/j/beer/hi.html>. Some inaccuracies have been noted in this source.