



MODERN WATERING HOLE Beer Bars

BY RUTH TOBIAS

DENVER, COLORADO

Like few other cities, Denver was built by the boozers, for the boozers. Its first government, according to state records, was founded in a saloon at the turn of the 1860s. Catering to the hard-knock yahoos come to stake their gold claim, there were barrooms before there were schools or a hospital; by 1910, the number had octupled from just under 50 to just over 400, thanks in part to an influx of bier-swilling German immigrants, among them one Adolph Kuhrs, who made a name for himself, literally, by tapping those now-famous Rocky Mountain springs to open a brewery in nearby Golden under his newly Anglicized designate, Coors.

In short, this so-called cowtown was bound to become the storied suds hub it is today. Home to the Great American Beer Festival each fall, Denver keeps the flow going year round—from countless dives immortalized by the likes of Jack Kerouac and Tom Waits to Wynkoop, the pioneering brewpub founded by none other than current mayor (and gubernatorial candidate) John Hickenlooper. Here are a few of our favorite places to visit.

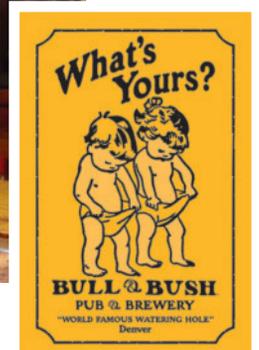


Falling Rock Taphouse

Excluding rare vintages, the average microbrew here will run you \$7. The average stupid question? \$1. That's just the way Falling Rock rolls, along with self-proclaimed smart-ass Chris Black, co-owner with brothers Steve and Alan of this 13-year-old Denver institution. The attitude's all part of the fun, reflected in the warehouse-style décor dominated by a wall-to-wall display of some 2000 bottles of beer. That most of them were emptied at one time or another by Black himself, however, goes to show that for all his wisecracking, he's utterly serious about his life's work. Having "built this bar to be the epicenter" of the Colorado craft beer scene, Black shakes up his selection—82 drafts, 130-plus bottles—so much even he can't keep it straight. "We could deforest the planet printing out a new list every time we make a change," he grins. Speaking of grand-scale mayhem, the storm that's brewing in the form of the beer Mutineer has created with New Holland will be unleashed at Falling Rock during the GABF. Read all about it on page 49, and come get drenched with us on September 17 at 2pm.

Bull & Bush

With a degree in food science and a passion for brewing and collecting beer he's been cultivating since, well, "before it was really legal" for him to do so, Erik Peterson is a geek among geeks. Establishing a brewery with his brother David on the premises of this long-lived, family-owned Brit-themed pub in 1997 was only the beginning; today, his experiments with brewmaster Gabe Moline run from long-term barrel aging to wacky infusions—think Korean chili threads, lemongrass, and black garlic. Must-tries include The Legend of the Liquid Brain Imperial Stout, a 2010 World Beer Cup gold medalist; Smoke on the Lager; and just about anything from the vintage beer vault (Peterson's personal fave: the De Dolle Speciaal Brouwsel 20).



Strange Brewing Company

Well, it's certainly quirky. Opened in May by two former employees of the now-defunct "Rocky Mountain News" in an out-of-the-way strip mall with the capacity for only ten barrels, eight taps, and snacks courtesy of a sausage vendor parked out front in a VW bus, Strange Brewing Company is already thriving on word of mouth; on a recent visit, for instance, I got an ecstatic earful from two customers—themselves owners of the soon-to-open Caution Brewery—about the Cherry Bomb, a stout co-owner Tim Myers created by mistake when he threw in the wrong kind of grain. Therein lies the advantage of a small operation, Myers explains. "[Partner John Fletcher] and I can experiment with a lot of different recipes without a lot of commitment. I can continue on with a one-barrel accident instead of just dumping it—and it could turn out pretty good."



Dry Dock Brewing, Co.

"Four ingredients. . .infinite possibilities." For a tiny upstart occupying a former auto-parts store in a suburban shopping plaza, it's an awfully dreamy slogan, but so far, Dry Dock is more than living up to it. Open only six months when owner Kevin DeLange and head brewer Bill Eye took their first gold at the World Beer Cup in 2006, the sunny, nautically themed venture has been raking in the kudos ever since, garnering the Small Brewing Company of the Year award at last year's GABF. The secret to their success? Undoubtedly that, even as they operate an adjoining brewing-supply shop and plan their second expansion in as many years, their business sense never outstrips their sheer ardor for idiosyncratic one-offs, from braggots (mead made with honey and barley) and sour beers to firkins every Friday.

Rackhouse Pub

It's set on the premises of Stranahan's Whiskey distillery in the Santa Fe Arts District. The entrance is marked by a giant portrait of The Dude from "The Big Lebowski", and the kitchen makes a mean Cajun shrimp dip. What more could you want from a funky, steampunk-inspired pub? Beer, of course, and you've got it, with 19 Colorado craft brews on tap at any given time—among them the occasional oak-aged exclusive that owner Chris Rippe scores from local breweries to which he lends whiskey barrels for just that purpose (recent examples include Avery Czar Imperial Stout and Great Divide Hades Ale). Of course, there's also a strong selection of craft spirits and even exotica like Mongolian milk wine: "My own personal taste for weird specialty beers may not be everybody else's," Rippe notes wryly, "so you've gotta have diversity."



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