

# Microbreweries and Culture in the Greater Madison Area

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Geography 565

12/17/2009

## **Introduction**

Have you ever visited a friend who was eager to show you something unique about their community? Everyone has their favorite home-town location in which they take pride. It is human nature to attach one's self to a particular place because it distinguishes them from everyone else. Maria Lewicka, a psychologist at the University of Warsaw, Poland, elaborates this point by describing place as a means to distinguish oneself from others, to preserve a sense of continuity and to build positive self-esteem, and to create a sense of self-efficacy" (Lewicka 2008: 3). Whether it is a restaurant, park, museum, or historic landmark, there is always something in a community to which residents connect. Emphasizing this phenomenon, there is a large movement in the U.S. to connect back to the local and the unique as a response to corporate America's homogenization of goods and services throughout the country.

This drive to move away from large corporations spawned what is termed 'neolocalism'. A relatively new social awareness trend, neolocalism is an attempt to go "back to the future" by rekindling local economic, social, and cultural practices rooted in past traditions and moral values. That is, the active, conscious creation and maintenance of attachment to place (Schnell and Reese 2003: 45). In this study, we investigate how microbreweries serve a part of that neolocal ethic of the Madison area as they reflect and shape local meanings and attachments to place through experience and symbolism. People yearn for something in their community to attach themselves in order to foster a local identity. Microbreweries provide this attachment. As microbreweries rise in popularity, inhabitants can re-establish a connection with the communities they live as

they have something to represent the new, unique, and the local (Schnell and Reese 2003: 46).

Wisconsin is home to sixty-six microbreweries. As beer is a staple of Wisconsin culture, microbreweries play a large role in exposing the large beer culture that encompasses the state. They provide a place for residents to garner cultural identity and instill a sense of local pride. Specifically, the Great Dane Brewpub, New Glarus Brewing Co., Ale Asylum Brewery, Capital Brewery, and the Tyranena Brewing Co. are all breweries in the Madison area that are a cultural hub for the surrounding inhabitants.

The Madison microbreweries and brewpub we studied are an integral part of the proliferation of community identity. They stay local and appeal to a specific customer base. The breweries themselves, events they host or sponsor, and the labeling and naming of their product are all characteristics of Madison microbreweries that reflect the culture of the Madison area. By examining several components of microbreweries in the greater Madison area, it became clear how these institutions contribute to community identity and the shape of Madison culture.

## **History**

In order to understand how microbreweries in the Madison area allow community members to attribute a cultural identity within the region, it is important to understand the history of microbreweries and how they have historically contributed to a local identity.

Wisconsin's past shows a long history characterized by beer and beer culture. When German immigrants came to Wisconsin in the mid-19th century, they brought their love of beer with them (Apps 1992: 13). Even as early as 1840, breweries were cropping up all over the state (Apps 1992: 14). This is important because the large population of

beer-drinking Germans in the region furnished the breweries of the area with a disproportionately large market compared to other regions (Flack 1997: 40). This history becomes apparent as present microbreweries deliberately target certain demographic groups through the regional culture a brewery emphasizes. The previous statement about Wisconsin beer drinkers encompasses a majority of Wisconsin inhabitants, but note that it generalizes the demographics of Wisconsin as a homogenous place where the majority of people drink beer. The truth is that Wisconsin is a diverse place with both alcohol drinkers and non-drinkers, as well as people with many drinking preferences. However, the microbrewery movement is steadily growing across the nation, and Madison microbreweries offer an insight into the cultures these breweries promote.

Cultural geographers show that place attachment strengthens through heightened consciousness of local history (Schnell and Reese 2003: 57). This is not a tell-all textbook type of history, but one that requires a familiarity with place, thus making the study of microbrew history important in the research of microbreweries and their place

within the region.



*Figure 1. The old Capital Brewery  
(Wisconsin State Historical Society)*

When thinking about the Madison area specifically, it has a history as a major component in the aforementioned Wisconsin beer-drinking culture. When Milwaukee emerged as a dominant American beer-producing city in the late 19th century, recognition and popularity spread to Madison. Most notably recognized is the old Capital Brewery (1854-

1920), which was a large and popular part of the Madison beer economy until it closed

and never re-opened due to Prohibition in 1920 (Figure 1). One of our research targets, the new Capital Brewery, opened in 1986. The naming of the brewery is no accident; it harks back to the previous brewery to reclaim some of the history that the original captured (Apps 1992: 164). Efforts by microbreweries to adhere to these historical representations are most clearly noted in beer names, product graphics, and the institution itself. We develop these aspects of a microbrewery further in this paper.

The above historical theme serves as a window back through time to what the region used to look like (Schnell and Reese 2003: 61). It provides a memory of the region as well as an opportunity to share local history with non-local microbrew drinkers (Schnell and Reese 2003: 58). The pre-industrial era to which microbreweries refer had perceived notions in which beer was considered ‘pure’, wherein no additives, preservatives, or chemicals were added to beer and where agriculture and nature reigned supreme. This era emphasized the role of farmers in beer supplies, the genealogies of family beer drinkers, and the German heritage of the region.

The founders of Capital Brewery proudly display this German heritage through a glass cabinet filled with beer steins (Figure 2).

A notable part of this trend to use local history is in contrast to major brewers such as Anheuser-Busch and Miller-Coors. Microbrews brew specialty and seasonal beers to fit in with seasons while large beer-makers simply brew the same beers all year



*Figure 2. Beer steins displayed at Capital Brewery  
(Photo by Eli Ross)*

round to keep up with the demand of a larger population and distribution network (Schnell and Reese 2003: 61). For example, in the winter, Capital Brewery brews a Winter Skål, and in the autumn, New Glarus brews an Oktoberfest ale which calls again upon traditions of German heritage. Major breweries started to muscle their way into the microbrewery segment in 1995 and 1996 by hiding their identities behind brands that protect a small-brewery image. Miller introduced Red Dog and Icehouse - from the fictitious Plank Road Brewery - and Coors produced Blue Moon Belgian Wheat. While these brands are still producing to this day, they have little effect on the overall microbrewery market (Schnell and Reese 2003: 51). This trend showcases a willingness to spend more for a product of wholesomeness, novelty, and variety. Microbreweries can concentrate their efforts on quality and freshness over quantity produced, and consumers appreciate an alternative for mass production.

### **Location**

To understand how microbreweries incorporate themselves into the Madison community and provide for a local identity, it is vital to understand why microbreweries came to the Madison area in the first place. There are certain characteristics of Madison that are welcoming of these local establishments. Of course, the extensive historic influence of the great brewing heritage in Wisconsin referred to above is a primary reason why microbreweries developed here but there are many cultural aspects that go along with it.

The first microbreweries in the Madison area developed about twenty years ago. Aside from the relatively cheap land in Madison during the 1990's, Madison is a great community due to the progressive-minded residents and the large market of people who

generally love beer and specialty brews. Madison has that feeling of a good quality Midwestern town. Glenn Schultz, sales manager and part owner of Ale Asylum Brewery, emphasized this by commenting how Madison is a ‘bubble in the state allowing it to be a hot bed for beer drinkers’ (Glenn Schultz, personal interview, 5 December 2009). This bubble concerns the population, government, and university, which makes Madison different than other locations in the state of Wisconsin. The Madison area provides the people and market necessary for a local brewery to establish itself. Additionally, Milwaukee and Chicago offered large markets nearby if business ever slowed.

The size of the Madison community provides the promotions and consumer base necessary to bring people to a brewpub or microbrewery. Eliot Butler, owner and founder of the Great Dane, noted that the Madison community had a “joyous response” to the opening of his brewpub. The Wisconsin State Journal headlined an article titled “Getting Tanked” in reference to the opening of the Great Dane. If Mr. Butler established the brewpub in his hometown, New York City, the Great Dane would be lucky if they received a spot in the back of a magazine for a food review (Eliot Butler, personal interview, 9 November 2009).

Schnell and Reese describe the microbrewery rise in the early 1990s as “astronomical” (Schnell and Reese 2003: 48). Prior to this explosion, microbrewery emptiness provided an area perfect for microbreweries to emerge. The Great Dane, Capital Brewery, Ale Asylum, Tyranena, and New Glarus did not have to enter an already competitive market and a framework of breweries developed. This framework allowed for all the new microbreweries to not look at themselves as competition, but to become partners with one another. After interviewing representatives of each of these

microbreweries, it became clear they did not look at each other as competition but referred to each other as a tight-knit community of brewers.

Many of the original starters of the Madison area microbreweries had local roots they wanted to communicate with their breweries. Stacey McGinnis, the event coordinator at Tyranena, said “being successful in-state is about remembering your roots” (Stacey McGinnis, personal interview, 23 November 2009). Glenn at Ale Asylum was born in Madison and Rob Larson, the head brewmaster at Tyranena, was born in nearby Watertown, Wisconsin. The brewmaster Rob LoBreglio at the Great Dane had a brother teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She advised he come to Madison because it provided the perfect opportunity to open a successful establishment.

### **Prosperity**

There are many reasons that microbreweries are successful. Most importantly, their success stems from producing a higher quality product that the major breweries abandoned with their homogenized American pilsner. However, producing a higher quality product is not the only reason microbreweries are successful; neolocalism plays a large role. The ability to drink a beer that is unique to one’s geographic location is appealing to many.

Additionally, microbreweries rely heavily on support from the local consumer base. Kirby Nelson, the brewmaster at Capital Brewery, discussed a philosophy for supporting local businesses called “3-50.” The idea of 3-50 is that one picks three local businesses to support and spends at least fifty dollars there each month. By consuming local products the money stays local and benefits the community (Kirby Nelson, personal interview, 13 November 2009).

Microbreweries often have a bar in the brewery and decorate it with pictures of local history, maps, and anything that connects with the local culture. For example, Ale Asylum Brewery has a photograph of the Madison skyline in the restaurant (Figure 3).

Additionally, many are painted with the images or colors reminiscent of the area to develop an ambiance reflective of the surrounding region. This allows local community members to not only relate to the brewery and beer, but to take pride in the culture and history of where they live.



*Figure 3. A panorama of the Madison city skyline hangs in the Ale Asylum brewery (Photo by Eli Ross)*

Eliot Butler discussed a concept that he feels makes his business successful; the concept of third place. Ray Oldenburg argues in his book *The Great Good Place*, there are essentially three places in life. The first place is one's home, the second place is work, and the third place is where one prefers to spend time when not at home or at work. Examples of third places are coffee shops, country clubs, and pubs. Mr. Butler wants The Great Dane to be the third place for the Madison population.

The Great Dane attracts many different types of people. Business people who work at the Capitol Square come in Monday through Friday for lunch and happy hour. Families and tourists tend to come in during dinner and weekends and the younger crowd comes in at night. Microbreweries create an atmosphere that is conducive to a third place

by allowing people to gather at a local bar. This movement towards local consumption drives microbrewery success.

Tyranena Brewery is another example of a brewery that exemplifies the concept of third place. The Mug Club is an elite group that is unique to Tyranena. Only five to ten members are added to it each year. To become a member, one must enter a raffle and is only allowed to join if his/her name is drawn. Membership in the Mug Club permits access to drink at the brewery's bar on Mug Club night with a personal mug. The bartenders know each member's mug number and the type of beer each member likes to drink, providing for a very local feel. Tyranena's Mug Club allows for a local identity to flourish because it is a gathering point for community members in the greater Madison town of Lake Mills, Wisconsin.

Microbreweries use a variety of techniques to affirm their orientation towards the local population. The marketing of breweries, the naming of beers and breweries, and events and sponsorships all play a role in emphasizing a brewery's local identity, and in turn, its success. By studying how microbreweries apply these techniques we can further our knowledge of the role microbreweries play in fostering local identity in the greater Madison area.

A business must decide whether it will serve a narrow segment of the market or try to appeal to a broader one. Wesson and Neiva De Figueiredo wrote that successful microbreweries are ones that focus on a narrow market instead of a broad one.

“A narrower [market] focus permits more concentrated use of fixed resources, facilitates the building of customer loyalty, and lowers the threat of retaliation from generalist incumbents but requires a much higher market share within the firms' target market to succeed” (Wesson and Neiva de Figueiredo 2001: 1).

Microbreweries in the Madison area focus on the narrow market by employing marketing strategies to garner local support and draw in the local population.

Microbreweries do not tend to use the traditional forms of advertising such as television and magazine ads, but instead rely on word of mouth, regional location, and festivals to spread their name. All microbreweries in this study facilitate a gift shop with brewery logos and merchandise to further their advertising efforts. Tom Wesson and Joao Neiva De Figueiredo wrote in their article “The Importance of Focus to Market Entrants: A Study of Microbrewery Performance”:

“...being regional was a key part of the beer’s charm, and serving it closer to home meant serving it in prime condition. Marketing consisted of visiting local bars to sell T-shirts emblazoned with the company’s logo and letting news of the quality of the beer spread by word of mouth. The concern was not only the limited shelf life but also the desire to build a faithful following by concentrating on local and regional motives (the name of the beer itself had a regional flavour), reinforcing the indigenous nature of the product.” (Wesson and Neiva de Figueiredo 2001: 12)

These names and images serve and target the people at the same time. Thus without the local consumer base, the local breweries could not survive.

### **Beer Names and Labeling**

Beers are not arbitrarily named; instead their names tend to reflect the local history and culture. They are named according to what people perceive as unique about their region, what they take pride in, and what makes their area different from anywhere else (Schnell and Reese 2003: 54). The consumer can develop a personal connection by connecting the name to a specific aspect of an area. We can then understand how microbreweries contribute to the creation of a local identity by understanding the ways in which they employ the use of local names. One can acquire the history, environment, or

culture of a place by simply reading the names and imagery posted on the bottles or packaging. While this promotes the local culture, it also works side-by-side with marketing.

Beers from the Rocky Mountain region have names associated with the rough terrain, while beers from the Northeast tend to express the colonial era. Schnell and Reese argue that these “locally rooted names produce both a sense of belonging to a unique place to the insider, and a chance to share this distinctness with newcomers” (Schnell and Reese 2003: 59). A sense of pride accompanies the image process. For example, Ale Asylum produces a brown ale called “Madtown Nutbrown” (Figure 4). A nickname of the city of Madison is “Madtown,” so when people drink the “Madtown Nutbrown” they

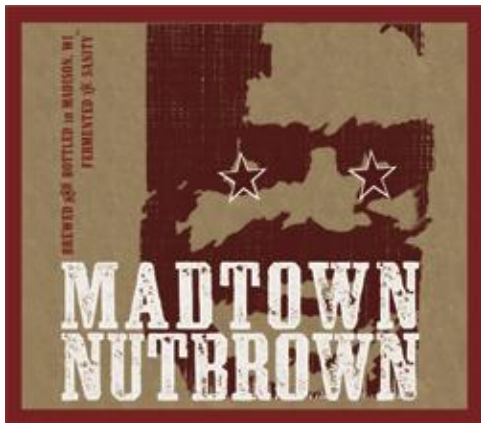


Figure 4. Ale Asylum's Madtown Nutbrown



Figure 5. Tyranena Brewing Company's Three Beaches Honey Blonde

associate it with Madison. Also, most if not all of the beer produced by Tyranena Brewery has a regional or local name. Its “Three Beaches Honey Blonde” (Figure 5) is named for the three beaches of Rock Lake, the lake that Lake Mills is situated around. Its “Stone Teepee Pale Ale” is named after a local legend surrounding a mysterious group of pyramids that lie below the surface of Rock Lake. Another example of a microbrewery naming its product after regional experiences is The Great Dane’s “Peck’s Pilsner.” The

Great Dane's website describes the beer as being named after Rosaline Peck, who was a frontierswoman and owner of Madison's first public house.

In addition to naming the beers, images play an important role in capturing a local identity. When picking an image to go alongside the local name of a brew, the brewers choose images associated with the location (Schnell and Reese 2003: 55). Images reflect local areas and are drawn from deep-rooted affection of the places where they are from (Schnell 2003: 57). Capital Brewery epitomizes this by placing an image of the Wisconsin State Capitol building on their most successful beer, Wisconsin Amber (Figure 6). New Glarus brewery emphasizes Wisconsin as a prominent dairy state with the logo on their beer, Spotted Cow (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Capital Brewery's Wisconsin Amber ([capitalbrewery.com](http://capitalbrewery.com))



Figure 7. New Glarus Spotted Cow ([newglarusbrewing.com](http://newglarusbrewing.com))

The names and images of the products are not the only way a microbrewery can emphasize its local roots. Many microbrewery names are reflective of the area they inhabit. This allows microbreweries to use their regional location to contribute to the development of a sense of place and community identity (Schnell and Reese 2003: 56). It is clear that the name of the New Glarus Brewing Co. contributes to the consumer's community attachment, because when they are drinking it they see the name "New

Glarus” and know that it is brewed in the city of New Glarus, WI. Capital Brewery uses its geographic location in its name, so that when one drinks a beer by Capital Brewery they associate it with Madison, the capital of Wisconsin.

### **Events / Sponsorships**

Beyond beer and brewery names, some microbreweries get involved in community development and establish ties to surrounding businesses and initiatives (Schnell and Reese 2003: 62). Events at the microbrewery or sponsored events by the microbreweries at an outsourced location aid the continual development of community identity. By branching out and helping with certain aspects of the Madison community, they help other entities in Madison flourish. Microbreweries are not the only institutions in town that promote neolocalism and a community identity, but by moving into a community these microbreweries are continuing to assist and foster a regional identity.

There are two types of events and sponsorships that we found during research: internally hosted events and externally hosted sponsorships. Internally hosted events take place at the microbreweries themselves. This brings the people in the surrounding community to the microbrewery to socialize and interact. Externally hosted sponsorships allow the microbreweries to get out into the community. Not all microbreweries studied participate in both types of events. Most external sponsorships have some charitable aspect to them. In contrast, many internally hosted events may involve charity but also merely facilitate bringing the people of Madison together.

When Eliot Butler settled down and opened the Great Dane he asked himself the question: is manufacturing alcohol the right livelihood? He was torn and was uncertain about what to do. He soon realized that his brewpub was a vehicle for doing well in the

community. What he did not initially realize was that having such a prominent local business influences community leadership. The Great Dane does not do much internally in terms of events, but after this realization Eliot Butler became a strong advocate of a positive influence on Madison. The Great Dane immediately became engaged with children's charities. He has held a position on the Children's Museum Board for seven years. Further taking advantage of the opportunity he has on this board, the Great Dane bought the *Discovery-to-Go* Van to bring items from the museum to areas around Madison where kids are not fortunate enough to travel to the museum (Eliot Butler, personal interview, 9 November 2009).

The Great Dane also sponsors a holiday egg hunt at Capitol Square. This event brings hundreds of families to Capitol Square. This brings potential customers for not only the Great Dane but many of the small businesses surrounding the square. This egg hunt also provides "add-on" opportunities for downtown businesses that cater to children. The Capitol Kids Toy store and the Madison's Children's Museum join and provide face-painting and an "Easter Hat Parade" before or after the egg hunt. Another notable community contribution by the Great Dane is the *Adopt-A-Family* program. For this program, the Great Dane asks staff and guests to donate money by buying tree ornaments at the Great Dane between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The Great Dane personally matches each contribution made and in 2008 came up with nearly ten-thousand dollars. The money is used to buy gifts for needy families. Employees at the Great Dane personally go and buy the gifts and deliver them to families dressed as Santa Claus. Examples of gifts in the past include clothing, furniture, and even a mini van.

Aside from their main events, the Great Dane is involved with many other groups to continue their community involvement. The Great Dane donates 10,000 dollars to the *Big Brother Big Sisters* organization of Madison annually. Great Dane beer is brought to the Aldo Leopold Nature Center Piper's in the Prairie fundraising event and they have a large presence at Madison Mallards baseball games. The Great Dane has a strong tie to the Madison community, allocating two percent of the Great Dane revenue budget for a different community group each year. With all of these community contributions, Eliot Butler makes it clear that you can never have too much community involvement.

Tyranena Brewery offers the type of community organizing opposite of the Great Dane. Tyranena does not do outside monetary sponsorships but hosts all of their events internally. The Tyranena Oktoberfest bike ride is a fundraiser for the charity "Tomorrow's Hope." Twenty-thousand dollars was donated this year. The Tyranena Beer Run raises money for the Lake Mills Food Pantry, the Jefferson county Animal Shelter and Christmas neighbors. It attracts over 1,500 participants and annual donations range upwards of 14,000 dollars and 18,000 pounds of food (Figure 8). Every June Tyranena will sponsor a dog wash for the Humane Society hosted at their brewery in Lake Mills, WI.

*Figure 8. A sample of the 1500+ participants at the Tyranena beer run, in the beer tent. (Photo by Evan Daniels)*





*Figure 9. Capital Brewery's Bier Garten  
(Photo by Eli Ross)*

Capital Brewery also brings people to its brewery for events held at their Bier Garten (Beer Garden, Figure 9). Their events serve more as a gathering point than a charitable event. During summer months, live music is played every Friday with local beer on tap at the outside bar. The inviting atmosphere at these events means a great gathering point for friends and families. Capital Brewery has also been asked to have a strong presence at weddings and

funerals. When asked why this was, brewmaster Kirby Nelson responded by describing beer as “a powerful liquid in building social bonds and celebration of life” (Kirby Nelson, personal interview, 13 November 2009). Capital Brewery provided beer at a funeral event on two separate occasions, in which the brewery charges nothing for their services. This shows brewing is much more than just a business but an institution truly willing to service its local people.

Ale Asylum holds events both at their microbrewery and at outside locations. At their microbrewery they host beer dinners bringing in outsiders to the microbrewery. They are involved with an array of beer festivals including the Lakefront Music Festival every summer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The events and sponsorships listed above show how microbreweries in the Madison area stretch out to the community. This allows Madison residents to associate themselves with something they declare their own. The plethora of fundraising activities

these institutions take part in provides continual community development and community improvement. These events and sponsorships show how entrenched these breweries are in the Madison community, whether it be outside sponsorships, interior fundraising, or community gathering events, these microbreweries are very apparent in the community.

### **Conclusion**

According to Steve Herbert, Jacqueline Gallagher, and Garth Myers in *Questioning Geography*, “many geographers possess an abiding interest in exploration, as a means to understand how the landscape is shaped, and how humans interact with it” (Herbert, Gallagher, and Myers 2005: 226). As our exploration progressed, we were able to understand how microbreweries in the greater Madison area reflect and foster the culture of their community. Several characteristics of microbreweries contribute to this local identity; including local history, location, product names and imagery, brewery names, and events and sponsorships. The chart below illustrates a summary of the neolocal elements apparent in the microbreweries (Figure 10). As microbreweries continue to thrive, their contribution to neolocalism allows residents to connect back to the new, the unique, and the local.

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