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SUMMER 2014

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## DENVER BEER CRAWL

City's craft beer scene just keeps getting bigger and better. Hot spots to hit now.

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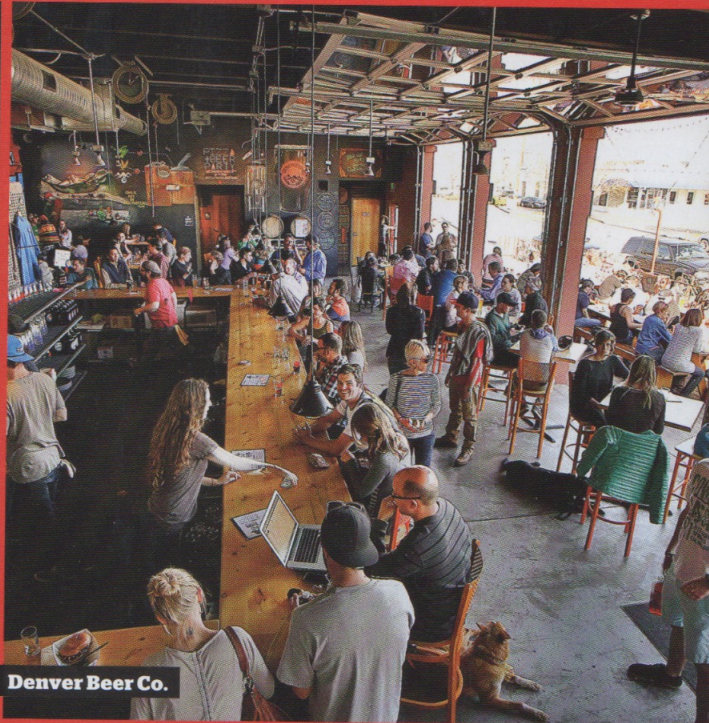


Breckenridge Brewery

Denver's mug runneth over with a growing influx of thirst-quenching craft breweries. Come along for a whirlwind pub crawl among some of the city's biggest crowd-pleasers and off-the-radar discoveries.

# WHERE THE BEERS ARE

BY JOSEPH GUINTO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC PISCOTTY



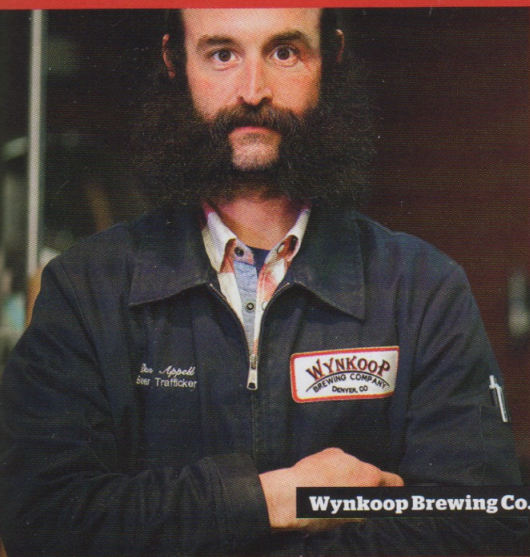
Denver Beer Co.



Strange Craft Beer Co.



Our Mutual Friend Malt & Brew



Wynkoop Brewing Co.



Wit's End Brewing Co.



Crooked Stave Artisan Beer Project

**I**T'S EIGHT O'CLOCK ON A WEDNESDAY night in Denver's charming Lower Downtown neighborhood, and I'm drinking a Rocky Mountain Oyster Stout, a beer brewed with meat. Organ meat, to be specific. Reproductive organ meat, from a bull, to be even more specific without being *too* specific. The brew is dark, rich, and a bit viscous, but nowhere near as disgusting as it sounds. "This beer is only scary by reputation," says my imbibing companion James Miller, a Denverite who pens a blog called the Beer Drifter. "You wouldn't even know there was meat in it if they didn't tell you."

I have just arrived in Denver and this scary-by-reputation brew is the first beer I've sampled in what I hope will be a whirlwind, two-day tour of the city's booming craft-beer scene. The operative word here being "sample." I'll just have small tastes because I won't have the time or tolerance for full pints. I choose Wynkoop Brewing Co., with its exposed brick walls, hardwood floors, and lacquered tables, as the first stop on my tour because, in 1988, it was the first brewpub to open in Denver. One of Wynkoop's original owners, John Hickenlooper, has since gone on to become Colorado's governor — and Denver has since become one of the hottest places in the nation for craft beer, with new breweries opening at a rapid clip.

Near the close of 2011, 15 breweries called Denver home. Today, there are twice as many, with more on the way. The *Denver Westword* weekly publication reports that as many as 50 breweries could be operating here by the end of the year. The city's residential renaissance is helping to drive that growth, and so, too, are the efforts of a new breed of brewmasters. Some of this new breed focus on perfecting traditional, historic beer styles from Germany, Belgium, or elsewhere. Others create entirely new brews from unusual ingredients such as kaffir lime leaves and agave nectar. Still others just make plain ol' good beer because they like making it.

Or, at least, that's what Miller tells me at Wynkoop. He also warns me not to expect my next stops to have Wynkoop's polish. "In true



Colorado spirit, the new breweries are staking their claims anywhere they can, with a lot of them opening out of old industrial spaces.” That means many of the new places have minimal decor and no food – other than whatever the food trucks that pull up outside their doors most nights sell. “They’re putting all their money into their beer,” Miller says.

Now it’s my turn to put some money into drinking that beer.



**W**

WITH SO MANY PLACES AND SO LITTLE TIME, I have booked a nighttime brewery tour with Denver Brews Cruise. My guide: Brent Scheiwe, who, on the tour’s website, proudly refers to himself as Captain Brent. He says his tours have never been busier, booking everything from conventioners to a group of Australian guys in town for a bachelor party. This, he credits to the boom in Denver breweries over the past couple of years. “It’s hard even for me to keep up with all the new breweries here,” Captain Brent says.

It could also be hard to *find* some of the new breweries without an experienced guide. After a stop at Breckenridge Brewery, the city’s largest brewer, we head to Wit’s End Brewing Co., which opened in 2011 in a southwest Denver warehouse district. Here, “warehouse district” doesn’t mean historic, revamped, red-brick structures like Wynkoop. Instead, it means bland, one-story rows of buildings. When we pull into the parking lot, I think Captain Brent may have run us aground. “There’s really a brewery here?” I ask. “You bet,” says the Captain.

I’m barely more convinced by the interior. A few taps perk up a small bar up front but otherwise there’s hardly any decor. Most walls are left unpainted. Empty malt sacks hang haphazardly everywhere. Exposed





ductwork and conduit run just beneath the 15-foot-high ceilings, and a few tables and stools break up the space between the bar and the very small fermenting operation in the back. Unlike the field of fermenting tanks at Breckenridge, Wit's End has just one tank at

**DRINK UP:**

Clockwise from top left: Wit's End Brewing Co.; Denver Beer Co.; Breckenridge Brewery; Strange Craft Beer Co.'s specialty beer board; Denver Brews Cruise's Captain Brent Scheiwe

the time of my visit and can make only one barrel at a time — though that will change this summer with the addition of a seven-barrel system. I sample several brews, including the Jean-Claude Van Blond, a Belgian blond ale so good I would have bought it by the keg if possible. Except, it's not possible. You can only get Wit's End's beers here. If you can find the place.

Captain Brent next sails us a mile-and-a-half north into the shadow of Sports Authority Field at Mile High Stadium. Amid a power plant, an unfinished rail line, and another strip of single-story warehouses, it feels less like where you'd locate a licensed bar and more like a place where high-schoolers would go to sneak some beers. But this is where the owners of Strange Craft Beer Co. — two former *Denver Post* IT guys — decided to open their operation a few years ago.

About 10 casually dressed men and women ranging in age from 20s to 50s gather at Strange's tiny, L-shaped bar. I try a flight of eight sample-size beers, including a Rosemary Pale Ale — flavored with rosemary, oatmeal, agave nectar, and zythos hops — that's slightly sweet and smells like pine, and the Powerhouse Porter, dense and bursting with chocolate flavor. My favorite, though, is the Cherry Kriek, an award-winning Belgian wheat beer incorporating cherries. It's red and foamy, and if I didn't know better I'd think it was a sparkling rosé Champagne. It is the best beer I've had so far in

Denver and I can't stop chattering about it to Captain Brent. Luckily for him, a Colorado Avalanche game has just faced off on the flat-screen TV behind me, and suddenly the strangers at the bar are talking to each other about the game. Captain Brent interrupts my Cherry Kriek monologue to point out what's happening. "It's easy to have a good time in these breweries, even with strangers," he says. "People who like good beer like other people who like good beer."

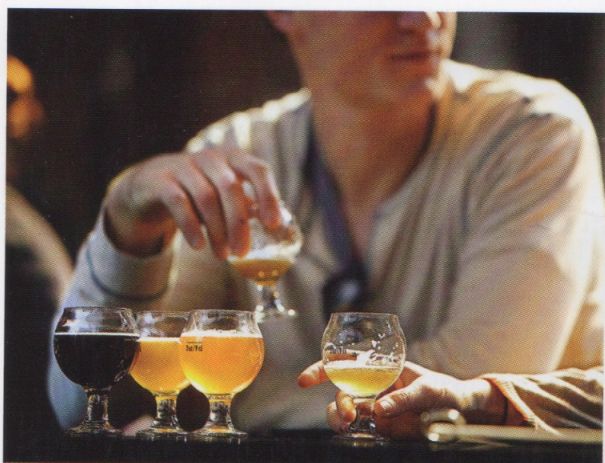
**T**HE NEXT MORNING AS I LOOK out my window from the tony Hotel Monaco, taking in the renovation projects going on in several downtown buildings, I start thinking about demographics. More than 635,000 people live in the city limits, 10 percent more than lived here a decade ago. They can't all like craft beer. At least, they can't all like craft beer enough to pay higher prices while eschewing cheaper beers brewed by big beer companies. So how are all these new craft breweries managing to coexist, even to thrive, here?

For answers, I head to Denver Beer Co. in the city's Highland neighborhood, where a new condominium building seems to be under construction on every corner. The 3-year-old brewery occupies a space that once housed an auto body shop, and it still looks like it. Inside the big, glass garage doors, the car shop's old floor jacks have been lifted to bar-table height and topped with circular tree grates that serve as places to set your beer.

Those beers have a reputation for being made with unusual ingredients such as Maya nuts, grape must, kaffir lime leaves, and roasted pumpkins. The price for that creativity? Five bucks a pint. That's a common price in Denver's breweries and, frustratingly, it's less than what I pay for a Coors Light in most bars where I live. "We're pricing beer for our neighbors," says Denver Beer Co. co-owner Charlie Berger. "We don't want to line our pockets. The point is to share our beers. I think a lot of brewers in Denver feel the same way."

Berger pours me a \$1 sample size of the "Hey! Pumpkin," so rich with





smoky pumpkin and cinnamon that it displaces Strange Craft Beer's Cherry Kriek as my favorite of the trip. I ask Berger whether Denver is nearing a brewery saturation point. "I don't worry about market saturation," he says. "Craft beer is far from the leader in the market right now. So, as long as everybody is making high-quality, really good beer, there's plenty of room for consumers to come over to the craft side."

**M**Y NEXT STOP IS PERHAPS as far along on "the craft side" as it gets in Denver. The Crooked Stave Artisan Beer Project focuses on a niche style of brewing rooted 200 years in the past, but updated with new science. The brewery set up shop last year in a rehabilitated 1880s foundry just a couple of miles northwest of Denver Beer Co. and is now home to an artisan marketplace called the Source. Crooked Stave's industrial-chic space in the back of the Source features an L-shaped bar and a huge open fermenting tank called a coolship. The beers here are mostly sour and wild ales, all aged in massive barrels called foeders (say "foo-ders"). Belgian brewers have been making beer this way for centuries, but Crooked Stave has won national acclaim for researching and updating the science behind how those wild yeasts work. Owner Chad Jakobson earned his master's degree in brewing and distilling and wrote his thesis on the biochemistry behind yeast fermentation.

Fittingly, I get a lesson on the making of Crooked Stave's beers as I taste seven different samples. "Part of the responsibility of being in this taproom is to be an educator," says Nick Mader, Crooked Stave's cellar reserve coordinator. "Because of that, the number of people we're able to turn on to this style of beer here is incredible."

So is the beer, especially the mouth-puckering saison called Surette, which spends more than three months aging in a foeder, and a burgundy sour ale called Origins, which has the color of a red

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**MULTIPLE CHOICES:**

Above left, samplers at the Crooked Stave Artisan Beer Project. Above right, clockwise from top, the SandLot Brewery, Our Mutual Friend Malt & Brew, and Crooked Stave



Bordeaux and the complex taste of a cocktail. The latter is now my favorite beer of the trip. "You're probably a wine drinker," Mader says, guessing correctly. "Wine people often like sours but don't like the bitter flavors you get with beer made with a lot of hops, like what you get with an IPA."

This is a palate-pleasing revelation for me, one that can lead me to make better beer choices — for my personal tastes — in the future. Or, for that matter, the present. I make several stops after Crooked Stave. A mile southwest there's River North Brewery, in a space that housed well-known craft brewer Flying Dog before that one relocated operations to Maryland. River North's 10-seat, blond wood bar serves one of the hoppiest beers in town, the Hoppenberg Uncertainty Principle.

Two blocks away, I stop at the SandLot Brewery inside the Coors Field ballpark. This brewery, with its 69-foot-long, tan-wood bar and 25 taps, has been the home of MillerCoors' Blue Moon Brewing Co. since 1995. You can't find most of what they brew



## Mile High Brewery Essentials

### 1 Breckenridge Brewery:

This large brewery with a bottling operation offers tours and serves excellent barbecue in its taproom. 471 Kalamath St.; 303-573-0431; breckenridgebrewery.com

### 2 Crooked Stave Artisan Beer Project:

This brewery and taproom inside the Source, an artisan market in the city's River North neighborhood, specializes in aged, Belgian-style, sour beers. 3350 Brighton Blvd.; 720-550-8860; crookedstave.com

### 3 Denver Beer Co.:

Housed in a former auto body shop in northern Denver, this brewery often uses unusual ingredients such as kaffir lime leaves in its beers. 1695 Platte St.; 303-433-2739; denverbeerco.com

### 4 Hogshead Brewery:

Located in the trendy Highland neighborhood, this stylish brewery focuses on English ales. 4460 W. 29th Ave.; 303-495-3105; hogsheadbrewery.com

### 5 Our Mutual Friend Malt & Brew:

This small brewery in the Five Points neighborhood has gained a following for malting its own grains — a rarity among microbreweries. 2810 Larimer St.; 720-722-2810; omfmb.com

### 6 Prost Brewing:

Located just west of the Platte River, it specializes in German beers and has a patio with a skyline view. 2540 19th St.; 303-729-1175; prostbrewing.com

### 7 River North Brewery:

This brewery serves Belgian and Belgian-American hybrid beers in an industrial-style taproom with views of the brewing operations. 2401 Blake St., #1; 303-296-2617; rivernorthbrewery.com

### 8 The SandLot Brewery:

Home of the Blue Moon Brewing Co., this bar located inside Coors Field opens year-round and sells a variety of microbrews. 2161 Blake St.; 303-312-2553; bluemoonbrewingcompany.com

### 9 Strange Craft Beer Co.:

Just 8/10ths of a mile from Mile High Stadium, this small brewery has a large beer garden out back. 1330 Zuni St., Unit M; 720-985-2337; strangecraft.com

### 10 Wit's End Brewing Co.:

This nondescript nanobrewery in an equally nondescript warehouse strip will add a seven-barrel system this summer. 2505 W. 2nd Ave., Unit 13; 303-459-4379; witsendbrewing.com

### 11 Wynkoop Brewing Co.:

Denver's seminal brewpub, opened in 1988, features 22 pool tables and a full food menu. 1634 18th St.; 303-297-2700; wynkoop.com



here — including the Goat Rancher, a full-bodied, somewhat sweet pale bock — outside of the stadium.

Less than a mile northwest of Coors Field, just past a restoration project that's bringing new life to Denver's historic Union Station, I find Prost Brewing, housed in a large, green-sided building that looks like a manufacturing plant. Prost makes only German-style beers from a brewhouse imported from a defunct German brewer.

I zigzag back across the river, a mile and a half to the east, to find a brewery that really stands out, in part because it absolutely does not stand out at all. Our Mutual Friend Malt & Brew is a gray box of a place that opened in late 2012 in a neighborhood called Five Points, where industrial corridors cut across blocks of very small homes. You won't find any gimmicks here, though it does malt its own grains, rare for a small brewery. The result: fresh, simple beers that people come in droves from across the city and country to taste.

Brandon Proff, who owns Our Mutual Friend with two friends he met when they were all home brewers, says this is exactly what makes Denver's beer scene so vibrant. If great, fresh,

straightforward beer served in a no-frills setting is all you want, you can get it. If it's not, you can find just about anything and everything else in Denver's breweries now. "Depending on your mood on any given night, you can choose where to go," he says. "If you like what we do, you can come here. If you want sour beer, you go to Crooked Stave. If you want a Dunkel, you go to Prost. If you want a British-style beer, our friends at Hogshead Brewery do amazing British beers. So many quality beers are being made now in Denver that you could have something great, and different, every night of the week if you wanted."

And if you want something that just so happens to be brewed with a bull's reproductive organs, well, you can find that in Denver, too. ■

RON THOMAS (MAP)