



African
BREW

EXPLORING THE CRAFT
OF SOUTH AFRICAN BEER

LUCY CORNE AND RYNO REYNEKE

African BREW



*For Shawn and Helen, because without them this book would never have happened.
And for Kevin, who would have loved to have read it.*

Lucy Corne and Ryno Reyneke



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INTRODUCTION

LUCY'S STORY

I was always a beer drinker. And when I say always, I almost mean it – I can even remember, as a small child, asking my dad if I could have “the froth” from his post-dinner beer. The university years brought the usual drinking exploits and a particular habit that would make a true beer lover cringe: that of adding a tot of lime cordial to my pint of lager. Ironically, although I was born and grew up in the UK – not 50 km from the British brewing mecca of Burton-upon-Trent – it took a Canadian to introduce me to the joys of sipping on a traditional English ale. Thanks to that Canadian – now my husband (see how beer brings people together?) – I was suddenly introduced to this amazingly varied world, where beer came in all manner of colours, strengths and flavours.

Beer took us around the world, the presence of a brewery – be it large or small – often dictating which towns would make it onto our travel agenda. We sipped on English bitter in Bangkok, bought a crate of cut-price Dashen lager in Gondar, Ethiopia, rediscovered rural England through its pints, and spent a fascinating afternoon in a North Korean brewpub when our guide needed a place to dump us for the afternoon without fearing we might wander off. It was also in Korea, South Korea this time, that I fell in love with the hop, thanks to a flourishing homebrewing community with a penchant for big, bold American beers. One sip of the flagship brew from the founder of the country's homebrewing club and I was forever hooked – the name of that beer? Death by Hops.

My beer-fuelled travels would eventually lead us, happily, back to South Africa in 2010, a country we had explored from tip to tip four years earlier, tasting every beer we could find along the way. On returning we could see that things had changed; that things *were* changing at a rapid and tremendous exciting rate. In a new city with just a sprinkling of friends, we sought out the place that we knew we would find a group of like-minded, open-minded and open-armed people – our local homebrewing club. It was through the SouthYeasters that I met Ryno, a meeting that would lead to the book that you have in your hands, *African Brew*.



RYNO'S STORY

It was my father-in-law who first exposed me to the possibility of brewing. Colin Vaughan had been brewing kit beers for a while when he invited me to a homebrewing festival a few years ago. A whole new world was opened up to me as I was blown away by the diversity of flavours on offer and how helpful everybody was with information about brewing.

I quickly purchased a kit beer and, after one brew, I was hooked. I loved the challenge of creating a tasty beverage out of the simplest of ingredients. I spent hours on the internet researching all the different variants of brewing, educating myself on how to make even better brews. In no time I had made my own all-grain system and was brewing as many variations of beer as I could think of. For someone who has always had a passion for food, making “liquid food” was a natural progression.

It was my wife, Helen, who inspired the concept of this book. After listening to my endless talking about beer, making beer and having to taste (she still is my “taster” and I trust her taste buds before I do mine), one day she said “it is time you married your passion and profession and published a book.”

I met Lucy at a SouthYeasters Summer Festival where I proudly presented my homebrewed creations for the first time to all who would taste them. After reading a few articles Lucy had written I knew I had found the right person to write my vision of what is happening in the brewing industry in South Africa today. Little did I know how large the revolution was becoming out there, with breweries opening all over the place at a constant rate by like-minded people as passionate about beer as I am.

It has been an incredible journey and I have been humbled by the dedication of each and every one of the brewers I met while researching and photographing *African Brew*.

THE AFRICAN BREW STORY

With a shared vision and a few false starts, we set off to start research on the book in April 2012. You might laugh at the idea of “research” and yes, it did involve tasting a lot of beers, but there was much more to it than that. We went to find the stories behind those beers and were met by smiling brewers displaying a selflessness, humility and unpretentious hospitality that characterises the beer world. Our journey taught us more about brewing, tasting, pairing and packaging. It took us along new alcohol routes, down the avenues of mead and sorghum beer. It took us to seven of the nine South African provinces (the Northern Cape and Limpopo don’t yet have any craft breweries); it took us to dusty *dorpe* and vast cities – it even took us into people’s homes for dinners and tastings. We quizzed the brewers and we picked the brains of SAB, without whom this book would never have got off the ground.

Beer is sweeping the nation, with bars stocking a greater range of beers than ever before, breweries sprouting up every month, beer festivals taking over the country’s social calendar and restaurants cottoning on to the idea that beer, like wine, can be a perfect partner for food. *African Brew* brings the taste of South Africa’s burgeoning beer culture into your home and we hope that it will also take you out of your home to do a little literal tasting in some – or all – of the breweries featured in this book.

TICKEY BEER

The former South African coin, known as a tickey, was worth three pennies and its name was used to describe a particularly popular beer in the nineteenth century.

THE BACKGROUND

HOW BEER BEGAN

“Someone left the cake out in the rain.” This oft-ridiculed lyric in the much-recorded pop song “MacArthur Park” was supposedly referring to lost love, but it so easily could have been a line about the origins of beer.

OK, so that would perhaps be oversimplifying the issue – and might not be entirely gastronomical accurate – but the basic premise is sound. Historians generally trace the first sip of beer back around 10 000 years ago – before that we were happily getting drunk on mead, and perhaps some rough-around-the-edges wine. The beer too, would have been a little, shall we say, rustic. Like so many great discoveries, beer was a fortuitous accident and while a cake might not have been involved, the inane “MacArthur’s Park” line isn’t too far from the truth. In fact, a widely accepted theory is that beer basically evolved from a spoiled loaf. It was the ultimate cloud with a silver – or should that be amber – lining: one minute you’re mourning the loss of your lunch, the next you’re feeling pleasantly tipsy after eating it regardless. Quite how it happened is something of a mystery. Some say that damp grain – grain which had already begun to ferment – might have been quickly cooked up to save going to waste; others believe a loaf itself might have got damp (left out in the rain perhaps?). Either way, there was grain, there was yeast and there was water. There was also a bunch of very happy people whose new hobby was most likely leaving their loaves lying around whenever the elders predicted a shower.

Drinking a wet loaf can’t have been an easy feat, and early beers are thought to have resembled porridge as much as liquid. Ancient Egyptian drawings often depict noble folk sipping from out-sized straws designed to suck the moisture from the thick slurry of wet bread or boozy porridge sitting at the bottom of the urn.

Exactly who came up with beer first is another point that is up for debate, though it’s quite likely that more than one group stumbled upon the idea at the same time. Is it a coincidence that this all coincided with man’s transition from a hunter-gatherer existence to sticking around in one spot and turning to agriculture? Not according to a lot of anthropologists, who believe that it was this magical mood-altering beverage that convinced our once roaming ancestors to stay in one place waiting for their grain to grow. In other words, beer is responsible for civilisation.

Early beer history is certainly shrouded in uncertainty – perhaps people were too busy enjoying their new-found nightcap to bother recording it – but once we reach 1700 BCE, things start to make it into the official history books. The oldest beer recipe was written by the Sumerians, inhabitants of the region of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and around), almost 4 000 years ago. Not only is the recipe – in the form of a hymn to the goddess Ninkasi – the oldest reference to beer brewing, it is also the oldest known recipe in the world, proving just how attached people were to their beer even back then. The hymn talks about a type of bread, known as *bappir*, made with honey and dates and later soaked in water to then be blended with other soaked grains before being left to ferment.

In the ancient civilisations – Egyptian and Sumerian specifically – beer pervaded almost every aspect of society. It was treated as a medicine, used in religious rituals, offered to the gods from whence it surely must have come. It was also used as currency, with speculation that the workers who built the pyramids were paid in beer, which might help explain how they managed the gargantuan structures without modern machinery. Some people claim to speak fluent French or Chinese after a couple of pints, others can achieve impossible architectural feats. The first large-scale breweries were also to be found in Egypt, though the country’s love affair with fermented grain would come to an end

with the arrival of Alexander the Great in 322 BCE. The Greeks, too embroiled in their own tryst with the grape, looked upon beer with disdain and reintroduced Egypt to wine. It would be the start of millennia-long rivalry between beer and wine, with strong opinions on either side that are still heard today. This same attitude was introduced to Britain when the Normans invaded from France in the eleventh century, bringing their penchant for wine along with them – until then the English were happily drinking their ales. Actually, for the most part, they continued doing just that for several centuries. Wine was largely reserved for the upper echelons of society, perhaps because, while it afforded a similar pleasant feeling to that enjoyed with a tankard of ale, it did not constitute a meal something which beer could.

As in early civilisations, it was women in England who traditionally brewed beer. Most were essentially forerunners to today's legion of homebrewers, but for a gifted few, brewing was a rare chance for women to earn honest money. Professional brewers were known as ale wives and until the Middle Ages they ran the alehouses throughout England. A simple flower would be their undoing, with the ingredient that many beer lovers today consider borderline sacred spelling the end of women's reign over beer production: the hop.

Hops were already being used in beer in small pockets of Europe – largely in the monasteries that were home to many of the continent's earliest breweries – but it wasn't until the early twelfth century that the flower's preservation properties became widely known. A Benedictine nun, later known as Hildegard, extolled the virtues of *Humulus lupulus* in a natural history text. Until then beer had been flavoured with *gruit*, a combination of various herbs and spices, but once the word got out that hops could do a better job, *gruit's* days were numbered. The spice mixture didn't go out without a fight though, largely due to the Catholic Church making a healthy chunk of change from the *gruit* industry. But hops did a far better job of making beer last longer and their use quickly caught on across Europe.

England was bent on resisting the use of hops and many of the ales remained unhopped for centuries – during this time the term *beer* was used to describe a malt-based alcoholic beverage with added hops while *ale* referred to the unhopped version, though these definitions have now faded into antiquity. Suddenly though, with the advent of hops, beer could be kept for longer, making it more viable to brew in much larger batches. Now there was real money to be made from beer and men wanted a piece of the brewing action. Women lacked the funds to invest in storage areas and gradually the job that had always belonged to them morphed into a male-dominated profession.

ALES WITHIN ABBEYS

You've probably heard of monks brewing beer in Belgium, but the small European country is not the only place to enlist their holy men to the brewing ranks. In fact, it's widely agreed that Europe's earliest commercial brewers were monks, with monastic breweries situated throughout France, Switzerland, Germany, England and the Netherlands during the Middle Ages. Their reasons for brewing were threefold – first, it guaranteed that passing pilgrims would be able to find refreshment behind monastery walls. Water was a sketchy beverage in those days and the fact that beer-making demands that the water be boiled made it an altogether healthier – not to mention tastier – alternative to plain H₂O. Secondly, selling beer helped to raise a few extra coffers to keep the monastery ticking over and, finally, keeping some for themselves helped the monks through times of strict fasting. Germany's strong Doppelbock beer was actually devised by monks as a meal in a glass, reserved for fasting periods when virtually no solid food could pass their lips. Today, monastic brewing is mainly practised in Belgium and it's still possible to visit a handful of breweries found within monastery walls.

Thanks to a generous dose of war, poverty, hunger and disease in the 1600s, brewing took a bit of a hit and in many European countries it once more became an endeavour practised in the home. Thankfully, fortunes improved and the start of the eighteenth century saw a revival in commercial breweries. As if to mark the resurgence, a new beer style was born in the now thriving city of London.

– the porter. The origins of this dark and roasty beer are the subject of much speculation and debate but whether or not it was named for the porters carrying their wares between London markets or not, one thing is for sure – it took the city by storm. This new, hearty beer helped drive the industrial revolution, just as the industrial revolution drove the brewing world in new and exciting directions. Suddenly beer production was steam-powered, leading to a vast increase in production, and since factory work was a thirsty business, consumption moved along similar lines. Major advances were made in malting, making one of beer's base ingredients easier to produce on a mass scale and considerably more productive. Once this technology reached German shores, they mastered it and used it to perfect an underground beer style that had been slowly emerging.

When I say “underground”, I don't mean that it was niche or kept secret from the authorities, though it might well have been both. The beer style born in a cave was quite literally developed underground and would one day become as far from a niche beverage as you could possibly get. As well as placing restrictions on the ingredients allowed in beer, Germany's early sixteenth-century beer purity law, the *Reinheitsgebot*, also imposed a ban on summer brewing. Since its pronouncement, brewers had been working on ways to produce year-round beer that was drinkable whatever the weather on brew day. Decades and centuries passed and the yeast – critters that usually prefer temperatures of 18–24 °C – morphed to cope with the cooler temperatures beneath Bavarian ground. Beers made with this hardy yeast had to be kept in the caves for some time to allow them to mature and took their name from the German word meaning “to store” – *lagern*.

A BREAKAWAY BEER REPUBLIC

If there's one country that has never followed trend or tradition when it comes to brewing, then diminutive Belgium is it. While Germany was passing doctrine on what could and could not appear in a recipe for beer; while Britain was bickering about whether hops or *gruit* made a better addition to ale, Belgium carried on doing its thing, chucking fruit, herbs, flowers and whatever else they fancied into their brewing vats. This anything-goes, almost hippieish attitude to brewing eventually gave rise to some of the most unusual and varied beers out there, all stemming from a brewing culture built by holy men.

Other “factions” of monks were already brewing but the Trappists – the monks that are most famous for brewing – didn't start until the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1919 a law banned distilled spirits from being sold in the country's bars, leaving a vacuum for those looking for a little kick in their booze. The brewers stepped in and satisfied the thirst with bigger, bolder beers with a considerably higher alcohol content than those found in most other brewing nations.



The hot liquor tank from the former Mariendahl Brewery (c. 1880) is now housed in the museum at Newlands Brewery in Cape Town.

This beer – a crisper, clearer version of the soupy ales people were used to – quickly caught on in Europe, but while many were making lager-style beers, it is Bavarian brewer Josef Groll who is widely credited with perfecting it. Headhunted by the Bürger Brauerei in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), Groll crossed the border in 1842, armed with a bagful of Bavarian lager yeast. When combined with the local Saaz hops and the latest advances in pale malt, the yeast helped to create what is credited as the world's first clear, golden beer, which became known for the town in which it was first brewed – Plzen. Alas, for some reason the brewery failed to patent its much sought-after beer and the refreshing style was quickly replicated around the world. Half a century later, the Bürger Brauerei (now called Plzeňský Prazdro) decided to make a point to global pilsner drinkers that they came up with the recipe first, bestowing it with the moniker “original pilsner” – in German, Pilsner Urquell. Lager-beers quickly swept the globe, with notable pockets of resistance being England, Ireland and Belgium. Today, a century and a half later, over 90 per cent of the world's beers are modelled on Groll's recipe.

Beer – most of it lager – was now being enjoyed throughout the world, though in 1920 Prohibition brought the American brewing industry to its knees. Alcohol in all its forms became illegal and the

booming beer business – there were around 4 000 breweries counted in 1873 – collapsed. Prohibition would eventually be repealed 13 years later, but by then the face of American brewing had changed and it would take more than five decades and an army of homebrewers to change it back. Before Prohibition, American lager already had its own personality – German settlers had brought the brewing techniques, but turned to the locally accessible crop of corn to counter the harshness and hardness lent by the available American barley. It was a full-flavoured pale lager that was as close to the German original that local ingredients would allow, but after 13 years of abstinence – and a bit of bootleg beer – people’s tastes had changed. A new generation emerged who had most likely never tasted beer, while their older counterparts had developed a taste for soft drinks and beer needed change to suit their palates. Add to that new laws limiting the alcohol content of beer and what emerged was a mild-flavoured though admittedly thirst-quenching brew that would be unrecognisable to the German brewers who first brought lager to these shores.

BEER FACTS, BEER FICTION

- Ancient Babylonian king Hammurabi allegedly took beer so seriously that there were strict punishments for anyone behaving badly where beer was concerned. Some state the offence as brewing undrinkable beer, some say it was pouring short measures, others claim that cutting the price of beer in a tavern was the crime, but all agree that the punishment was drowning. Whether beer was the medium in which the wrong-doers were drowned is disputed, though it’s unlikely the despot would waste his precious booze drowning miscreants.
- The first British settlers to reach American shores weren’t full-on puritans. In fact, when the *Mayflower* made landfall in 1620, it missed its mark somewhat. The ship was supposed to hit the shore of what is now New York, but since the beer had run out on board and they were left in need of water, a new destination was chosen and they landed instead in Massachusetts.
- Probably the biggest ever beer catastrophe happened in London in 1815. After a rupture in a brewing vat, beer swept through the parish causing a booze tsunami that destroyed a couple of houses and a pub. Eight people died and over a million pints of beer was lost.
- Of all the adjuncts and extras added to beer throughout the years, perhaps the most grotesque is *lant*. *Lant*, an Old English word meaning stale urine, was said to be added to beer in some European pubs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to strengthen it ... In the 1980s, the practice of adding pee to beer reared its head again, though claims that Mexican brewery workers were peeing into vats of Corona bound for the USA were later found to be made up by a Heineken distributor in Nevada.

Consumption rose, but the number of breweries decreased as they merged or closed, leaving less than 90 breweries by the late 1970s, almost all of which were churning out a similar product. Then in the 1980s things began to change as microbreweries started to open with increasing frequency. The thirst for a greater range of beers echoed a similar movement in the UK, but it’s probably fair to say that it was the American craft beer boom that transformed the global beer map. In a pattern that has repeated itself across the world – throughout Europe, East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and now South Africa – the revolutionaries behind these unusual, full-flavoured and very varied beers were largely homebrewers who had long been creating beer on a tiny scale to quench their thirst for variety. Today there are over 80 styles of beer recognised by the BJCP (Beer Judge Certification Program)

US-based scheme that accredits judges and sanctions beer contests. It is an exciting time to be a beer lover, with experimentation rife, flavours bolder than ever and a variety the like of which has never been seen before. We are living, quite simply, in an era that can only be described as the Beer Renaissance.

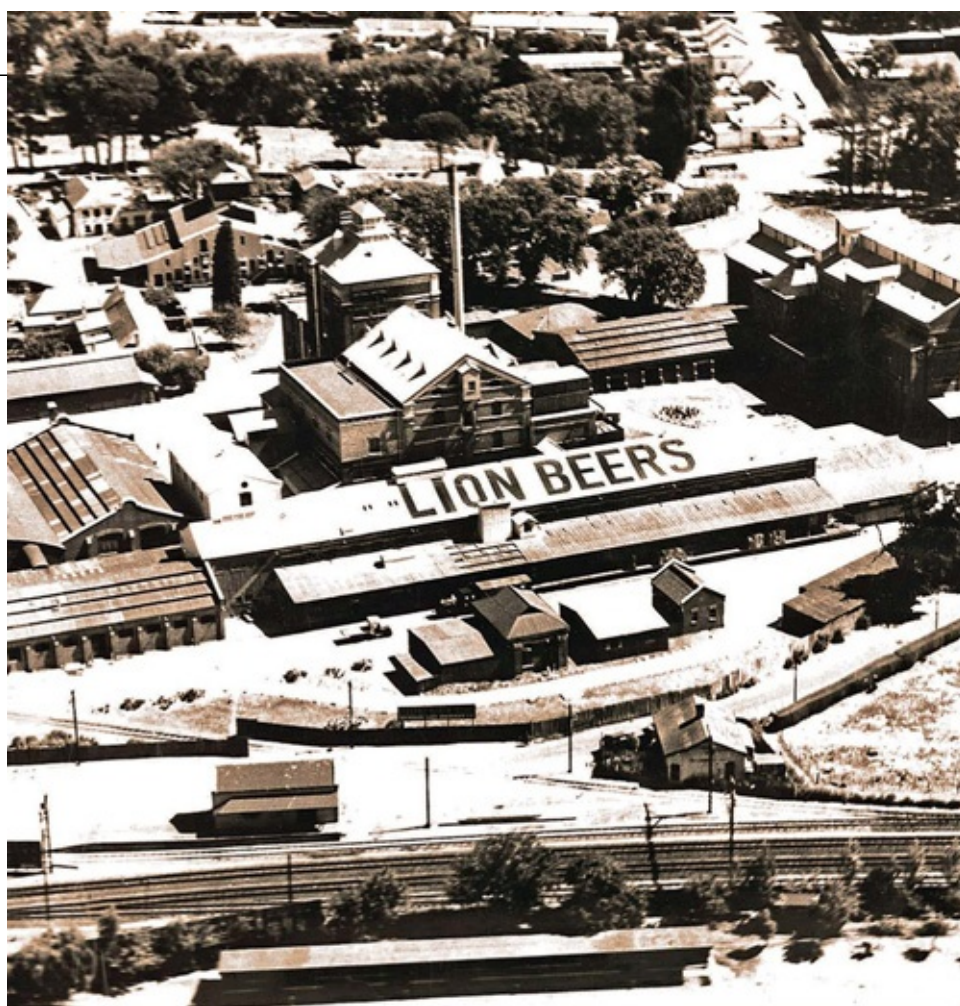
THE BIRTH OF BEER IN SOUTH AFRICA

As in world booze history, beer in South Africa was predated by another fermented beverage – mead. The Khoisan used “honey wine” (simply honey and water, fermented with yeast found naturally in the honey) in many of their religious practices, calling the drink *!karri*. The drink was made by various other groups in South Africa too, including the Xhosa, who called it *iQhilika* and the Tswana, for whom the beverage was known as *khadi* (for more on mead, see [page 145](#)). As well as mead, tribes that had migrated from Central and East Africa made a drink that is still popular throughout South Africa today – sorghum beer. It seems that sorghum beer brewing in South Africa had its roots in a much older beer tradition, with later explorers noting that the strainers used by the Zulu people were incredibly similar in design to those used in ancient Egypt (for more on sorghum beer, see [page 243](#)).

STUDIES IN BEER

When the now-renowned Reinheitsgebot listed Bavarian beer’s permitted ingredients in 1516, the essential element was conspicuously absent. At least, it is conspicuous now, but at the time no one understood that yeast was the magical ingredient that turned sweet, malty water into the wondrous liquid that is beer – it just happened naturally. It wasn’t until Louis Pasteur published his book *Études sur la bière* in 1876 that the processes behind the pint became known. As well as working out the secrets of fermentation, the world’s best-known beer scholar wrote probably the first list of off-flavours and their causes. He also came up with a way to fend off the bacteria-borne diseases in beer and would give his name to the process – pasteurisation.

Traditional beer was a common subject for Europeans chronicling South Africa back in the nineteenth century, with particular attention paid to the many ceremonial uses of the beer and above all to its lack of potency. Missionary Robert Moffat was perhaps in search of a stronger brew throughout his time in South Africa, as he often commented on the low alcohol content of sorghum beer. “It would require one to drink several gallons to produce the effects like ale or spirits” he once noted in his diary, later commenting again that it “possessed of very little of an intoxicating nature”.



Aerial view of Newlands Brewery c. 1920.

Following in this theme, an early twentieth-century quote from Zulu historian Father A.T. Bryant perhaps sums up what the early Europeans thought about the local brew. “This native beer, though wholesome, does not appeal strongly to most Europeans; which is understandable, seeing that the normal alcoholic content can hardly be more than two per cent. The beer is a pinkish liquid ... and to the European, it has the flavour of highly diluted ale mixed with sorghum meal.” Of course, by the time he was experiencing the joys – or otherwise – of sorghum beer, Europeans had long since reached South African shores and there was a thriving trade in “clear beer”.

It’s well-known that Jan van Riebeeck wasted little time in planting vines when he arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. But in fact, the first wines were produced in 1659, two years after he first, albeit not very successful, brew. Not only were brewing supplies on one of the first shopping lists he sent back to The Netherlands after landing at the Cape, but in fact the fleet that brought Jan here also carried a fair supply of barrelled beer on board. It was inevitable that Jan and his crew would quickly turn into homebrewers when they hit African shores, considering the solid beer culture alive in their native land. And when you think of the reason for the Dutch landing in South Africa in the first place, the settlement couldn’t very well continue for long without a brewery of some sort. Cape Town, as it would eventually become known, was established as a refreshment station, there to help restock supplies on boats headed to the East, and what kind of refreshment station would it be if it couldn’t replenish the on-board booze supply of passing ships? They were quite wrong, but those early round-the-world travellers thought that beer helped stave off scurvy, so it was a vital commodity to have in the hold. Cape Town quickly became known as the “Tavern of the Seas” and it would have been a pretty paltry tavern without a steady supply of beer.

Once Van Riebeeck had secured the various ingredients needed to attempt a brew, with corn as the

base grain, he was missing just one element – a brewer. The arrival of Pieter Visagie, an Antwerp sailor, was a turning point for the Tavern. He arrived with brewing knowledge and soon set up what was South Africa's first "clear beer" brewery near the Liesbeek River. In 1658, after a false start of two (the 1657 brew never fermented), he brewed South Africa's first pint, which Van Riebeeck recorded as being "delicious". The country's first brewhouse was built in 1659 and South Africa's long and tumultuous love affair with beer began.

It was far from plain sailing though. Ingredients were tough to come by, attempts to grow hops in the area failed and one shipment was allegedly lost in transit when a ship cook, mistaking the hop flowers for veggies, turned the lot into what must have been the most unpalatable salad of all time. Despite the lack of hops, brewing took off, with people starting to brew unhopped beer in their homes. The first licenced brewer, Jan Martensz de Wacht, set up shop in 1664, with a decree to "brew as much Cape beer of malt and hops ... as the Honourable Company shall see fit".

By now Jan van Riebeeck had left the Cape, but the brewing legacy he had started continued with a new beer, known as "Mom", appearing in 1666. It was a heavy brew that had first emerged in Germany at the end of the fifteenth century. Alongside this grew another branch of brewing, one that was both cheaper and easier to produce. Sugar beer was composed of bran, black sugar and hops and became a popular homebrew. It presented great competition to Company beer, and its production was quickly – if not very effectively – regulated. Only orphans and widows were permitted to sell sugar beer, but many settlers continued brewing it for profit, to the detriment of the Company's revenues, and its sale was later banned entirely.

Beer's popularity in South Africa was to take a hit towards the end of the seventeenth century, with the arrival of the Huguenots. Wine was already being produced with varying levels of success, but the French settlers brought with them greater winemaking knowledge and, as the quality improved, beer sales decreased. People were still drinking beer, but many were making it at home, perhaps feeling that their own concoctions were as drinkable as the beer available for purchase. Simon van der Stoop brought in regulations barring people from selling imported beers and "Mom" in a bid to save the Company's profits from further damage, but perhaps a better plan to boost their business was the appointment of the Cape's first qualified brewer in 1696. Rutgert Mensing proved himself quickly when he chose a site for his brewery that still plays a large role in brewing today. His knowledge of beer-making meant that he understood the importance of water and he was allotted 30 morgen of land in his chosen spot – near the spring in Newlands. People perhaps rejoiced at his apparent expertise a little prematurely, since it was three years before he produced any beer on his estate, known as Papenboom.

THE ORIGINAL BREWERS

Historically, beer was made by women, whether it was in Europe, Africa or anywhere else. Although brewing is a largely male-dominated world today, female brewers are increasing in number. African beer history is dotted with female protagonists, worshipped, one way or another, for their feisty spirit. Here's a trio of the most memorable:

Mbaba Mwana Waresa

This is one of the most-loved Zulu goddesses and not because she's associated with agriculture, rain or rainbows. She is associated with all of those things, but she is also credited with the invention of beer and with passing her brewing knowledge on to the Zulu people.

Cockney Liz

Although female barmaids were common during South Africa's gold rush era, few were recorded as frequently as one known simply as Cockney Liz. When she moved to Barberton (Mpumalanga), she gained fame and popularity as a straight-talking barmaid and talented entertainer. She later went on to own bars in the region – perhaps thanks to her habit of auctioning herself to the highest bidder each evening. Her name lives on in a hotel in the town.

Aunt Peggy

Journalist Casey Motsisi's much-documented Shebeen Queen might have been a fictional character, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a large helping of truth behind her ways. A composite of various tavern bosses of the time, she showcased the much-loved traits of the Shebeen Queen – most notably an ample bosom, a devotion to her customers and a fiery, no-nonsense spirit.

Mensing's foray into the world of Cape brewing was largely a disaster and although his family attempted to keep his brewing monopoly going after his death, they were even less successful. Brewers came and went but the beer stayed much the same – an inferior brew, due in part to lack of expertise but more so to the lack of quality raw materials available. Imported beer was sought after and local production suffered, not aided by the Papenboom brewery burning down in 1773. All-in-all, while the early settlers enjoyed beer, they hadn't excelled at producing it and while the arrival of the British in 1795 was unwelcome in many ways, at least they brought some ale with them. Imported beer quenched the collective thirst for a while, but when the British arrived en masse in 1820 there was a healthy number of beer drinkers – and luckily a few brewers – in their ranks. Soon breweries began to pop up not just in and around Cape Town, but further afield in Grahamstown, Somerset East and throughout Settler Country in what is now the Eastern Cape.

Sorghum beer – also sometimes made with corn – was still the drink of choice for the African population and there are many mentions of the brew being offered as hospitality to visiting Europeans, especially by the Zulus. Zulu chief Dingane was particularly noted for his love of beer, with American missionaries observing that he enjoyed beer for breakfast and counted on numerous deliveries of beer throughout the day. Beer also played its role in the Weenen Massacre, when it was used to distract Pieter Retief and his men before Dingane's fatal attack took place. For the Europeans though, it was "clear beer" that they sought, and back in the Cape the foundations for what was really the country's first beer boom were being laid.

In 1820, Jacob Letterstedt had set up the Mariendahl Brewery, named for his wife, in what was unarguably the cradle of South African "clear beer" – Newlands. Letterstedt's brewery survived the tide and although others launched and failed, it was clear that brewing had finally arrived in Cape Town, with an 1854 census noting 13 breweries in the city.

The cooper trade – one that has all but died out today – also flourished, with close to 60 barrel makers known in the region in the middle of the nineteenth century. Around this time, taverns and breweries began to sprout up in the Natal region, and beer made its first foray into the hinterland, with

licenced “drink wagons” serving as mobile pubs. Breweries at this time sold only ales, with menus reading much like they would at a traditional British pub today. Many of the brewers were indeed British, but it was an ambitious young man from another European country that would have a long-lasting effect on the South African beer landscape.

Anders Ohlsson, a Norwegian by birth, arrived on Cape shores in 1864, two years after the death of the Cape’s other Scandinavian brewing mogul, Letterstedt. A career in importing goods from Sweden followed, but in 1881 Ohlsson realised that there was money to be made in brewing and he bought land in Newlands. Here he built his first brewery, Anneberg, but Ohlsson obviously had greater things in mind and he set about building up a beer empire. In 1888 – a notable year in South Africa’s brewing history – Ohlsson made his first move, taking over the Cannon Brewery and the Newlands Brewery, both located in the same suburb. A year later, Ohlsson added to the empire, leasing – and later buying – the late Letterstedt’s Mariendahl Brewery.

Ohlsson’s arrival on the brewing scene was perfectly timed, for the golden era of South African brewing was about to begin. Prospecting, be it for gold, diamonds or whatever other mineral, was thirsty work and as gold fever hit the Witwatersrand so did a thirst for gold of a drinkable kind. The 1880s saw a wave of taverns springing up around the newly-established Johannesburg and a spate of breweries opening to keep the diggers’ thirst at bay. Kimberley’s brewery trade never blossomed due to water shortages in the region, though there was one failed brewery that would have a long-lasting effect on the South African beer trade. Charles and George Chandler, brothers from England, started making beer in diamond country in 1884. The brewery didn’t last, but Charles had his heart set on brewing and he moved to the Witwatersrand where his beers were welcomed in the dusty world of gold prospecting. His brewery – first known as the Wiltshire Brewery after his home county in England, but later taking the still-remembered name of Chandler’s – flourished while others came and went. Another soon-to-be famous name soon arrived on the Pretoria scene, with the Lion Brewery opening its doors in 1891.

One more name that would be forever immortalised in South African beer history was to enter the fray in this landmark decade of brewing – Charles Glass. Glass had been brewing for British troops in India and wanted to set up a brewery on the Witwatersrand with his wife, Lisa. He sought and secured financial backing and the husband-and-wife brewing team quickly got to work, though their role in the brewery was short-lived. After a couple of years the backers bought Glass out, but they did keep the quickly established logo, a logo that would give its name to the brewery and would live on to the present day. The emblem in question was simple in its design – a picture of three castles.

In 1888 – the same year that the Glass family began brewing in Johannesburg and that Ohlsson was building a beer monopoly in the Cape – important developments were taking place around Durban with the arrival of an English teenager with ambition, Frederick Mead. The 19 year old did a quick and competent assessment of the brewing industry in the area, noting the state of local equipment and the quality of the beer, and concluding that there was scope for another player to enter the market. In 1888 he established the Natal Brewery Syndicate in Pietermaritzburg. Mead later went on to buy the Castle Brewery, with the two merging under a new name – South African United Breweries. Mead sought further backing from diamond mining magnate Barney Barnato and businessman Sammy Marks and the company was re-christened again, this time with a name that would stick and one day become internationally recognised – South African Breweries. SAB, as it would later become known, was officially founded in 1895. With the new Castle plant in Johannesburg ready, SAB brewed the first lager beer in Africa and Castle Lager was introduced to the local market in 1898.

The Anglo-Boer War would halt production in breweries across the country and while some weathered the storm, others closed to never reopen. Imported beers started to arrive again, but because the quality of beer brewed in South Africa had improved considerably, imported beers were no

considered a luxury rather than an essential. There were still breweries dotted around the country, but for the vast majority their days were numbered. The number of beer drinkers diminished with the withdrawal of troops and there was a global trend towards business mergers – a trend that was echoed in the South African brewing world. Smaller breweries were swallowed up and two brewing giants arose – SAB and Ohlsson's, with a smaller player still hanging on to a few loyal beer drinkers. A north-south lager divide emerged, with those in Cape Town preferring pints of Lion (Ohlsson had bought the Pretoria brewery in 1902) and Jo'burg dwellers lapping up the Castle. As SAB expanded into the Cape, there was talk of the two merging, but as discussions broke down the breweries became rivals, each one employing new marketing techniques to get their beers noticed.

One area where they did work together was in hop production and, in 1935, hop farming kicked off in George – the region with a climate similar to that of the world's major hop-growing region. Brewers in South Africa had dabbled in hop production for decades, but it was the hop famine created by the 1914–18 U-boat Campaign that made South African beer producers realise that they needed to become self-sufficient when it came to ingredients. Maltsters had long been operating at the Mariendahl Brewery and until demand picked up, small-scale maltings were enough to keep the industry ticking over. In the 1970s, the large maltings plant at Caledon opened, but first the beer industry would have another problem to deal with.

South Africa's beer history closely mirrors that of the United States, with a late nineteenth-century boom and then steadily decreasing numbers of breweries. And as in the US, politics would play a part in the temporary decline of beer consumption. South Africa's prohibition era did not spell a total halt to alcohol production as it did in the States, but the 1928 ban on black South Africans drinking "European liquor" did harm the brewers' profits. Of course, the damage would have been much more serious if not for the advent of a phenomenon inextricably linked to South Africa's beer history – shebeens. While "Shebeen Queens", that is the women who ran the illegal drinking dens from their homes, did produce a fair amount of alcohol themselves, there was also a healthy trade in bootlegged booze. In fact, the number of people still purchasing beer from SAB was so great that it spelled a production faux pas once prohibition was lifted in 1962. SAB, anticipating a sharp hike in demand, invested in new equipment and stepped up production in anticipation of the day when beer would be legally available to all. Since many of the "new" customers were actually already drinking lager albeit illegally, much of the stockpiled beer ended up being thrown away.

When South Africa emerged from prohibition, beer drinkers found themselves, as in the USA, with a narrowed market. In 1956, a merger had been agreed that saw Ohlsson's Cape Brewing and Union which had grown out of the Chandler's Brewery, incorporated under the SAB umbrella. SAB's strength was further reinforced in the 1960s when the company won the right to brew three prominent overseas beers – Amstel, Guinness and one that would later become an identifying beer for many South Africans, Carling Black Label. Other breweries attempted to enter the field, perhaps most notably the Luyt Brewery, established in 1972. Assertive marketing campaigns followed, but the start-up was no match for the long-established competitor and SAB soon bought the brewery. Founder Louis Luyt later established a microbrewery in Ballito, KwaZulu-Natal and his legacy – an award-winning brewhouse – now lives on at the Stellenbrau Brewery in Stellenbosch (see [page 109](#)).

Then in 1983, almost a century after the last beer boom in South Africa, a new player arrived on the scene – one that could not and didn't want to challenge the might of SAB, but that did challenge the palate of the South African beer drinker. Ales, once the staple pint in the country, had gradually fallen out of favour, but with the country's first microbrewery – at least since this term had been coined – came a new style of beer. Mitchell's Brewery (see also [page 87](#)) began with a lager, but quickly moved into the realm of English ales and it weathered the storm until the craft beer boom of the twenty-first century. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, small breweries began to crop up around

the country, with an early cluster emerging in KwaZulu-Natal. During this period, SAB continued to expand overseas, with its acquisition of breweries round the world peaking with the purchase of US-based Miller Brewing Company in 2002. SABMiller was now the second largest brewing company in the world by volume, after American giant Anheuser-Busch InBev.

Back on South African shores, interesting changes were taking place, albeit on a considerably smaller scale. A decade into the twenty-first century, beer experienced a popularity explosion the like of which had not been seen in more than 100 years, with imports on the increase and a range of styles available that even went beyond the choice on offer during the gold rush era. Today there are over 400 microbreweries – so named for the smaller batches of beer that they produce – sitting in almost every province. The brewers have largely stepped forward from the country's army of home-brewers in yet another trend that mirrors happenings in the USA. Deep down, South Africans were always homebrewers – from the sorghum beer brewed by African women through the experimental brews of questionable drinkability from Jan van Riebeeck and Pieter Visagie and on to the “needs must” offerings of the twentieth-century Shebeen Queens. Today, as beer appreciation spreads, there are scores of homebrewers brewing away in their kitchens, sheds and garages – a sure sign that South Africa will be able to count on a multitude of microbreweries for many years to come.

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FROM GRAIN TO GREATNESS – HOW BEER IS MADE

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

When it comes to basic ingredients, beer appears to be a simple recipe based on water, malted barley, hops and yeast. There are many variations of each of these though and changing just one variable will result in an entirely different beer. Unless you're a beer puritan and a devout follower of Germany's purity law, there are no limitations on what you can add to your beer, whether it's herbs, spices, fruits or cereal adjuncts ... but let's begin with the basics.

Water

The most abundant ingredient in beer is one that many brewers consider to also be the most important – so important in fact, that in the beer world, humble H₂O is known as “brewing liquor”. It's no coincidence that South Africa's first ever brew-route grew up in Cape Town's Newlands suburb. The purity of the water flowing from the Newlands Spring made for perfect brewing liquor and homebrewers today make the journey to fill up buckets and bottles with the purest water they can find. Water is so important in brewing that people have spent years – and fortunes – trying to replicate the water found in some top brewing regions. Take the UK's Burton-upon-Trent for example: the once-time brewing capital of the country churned out such clear, flavourful beers that breweries elsewhere wanted to replicate the town's ultra-hard, calcium sulphate-rich water, developing a process that is still known today as “Burtonisation”. Water has so much influence on the final flavour that certain global beer styles have grown up simply because local water was better suited to a certain style, such as in Pilsen, Burton, Munich and Dublin. So just what is it that makes certain water so desirable to brewers?

One of the most important factors is the “hardness” of the water, with water rich in certain minerals being considered “hard”. These minerals play a scientific role in brewing and having them in high doses can help with yeast nutrition among other things. Knowing your water – and if possible, being able to choose your water – can help you to create or avoid certain flavours in the beer since different ions can have different results. Iron, for example, can impart a metallic off-flavour; sulphate offers desirable dryness and too much magnesium can give an unpleasant, astringent bitterness. For those without a spring or rain water reservoir to utilise, there is always tap water, though removing the chlorine is essential or it will lead to an instantly recognisable off-flavour that smells and tastes like Band-Aids or TCP. Of course, it is possible to treat the water and many breweries add certain elements to improve the quality of their brewing liquor. Others will even use reverse osmosis or ion exchange – both effective but expensive ways to end up with ultra-pure water and really only practical for large breweries.

Many South African brewers are rightly proud of the water they use, which often comes from underground springs, trickles down through the mountains or is collected straight from the sky.

Malted barley

Usually referred to simply as “malt”, malted barley gives beer its colour, its body and much of its flavour. Malt can also refer to other grains, such as wheat, but for the moment let's stick to looking at barley. Barley, of course, starts its life in the field, but once the crop has been harvested, it's only

halfway through the journey and will need to spend time in a maltings plant in order to fulfil its destiny as an ingredient in beer.

In South Africa, barley is largely grown in the region around Caledon in the Western Cape, as well as near Douglas in the Northern Cape. There are two major maltings plants in the country, both owned and operated by SAB. By far the largest is in Caledon, where 13 500 tonnes of barley is malted every month.

There is a lot of science in each sip of beer and this starts with the maltster, whose job is to encourage certain enzymes in the grain to expose starches that can be successfully converted into fermentable sugars, for without fermentable sugars, your beer would be little more than a cup of sweet malt tea.

Malting is a three-step process, with an optional fourth step if you're seeking to produce dark malts.

Step one: Steeping

After being sieved and sorted, with foreign matter that you wouldn't fancy in your beer being removed, the barley kernels are steeped in water. The steeping process can take up to two days, though the grain is not soaked continually for this time, instead being drained at regular intervals and allowed to air rest. Once the grain begins to sprout, or *chit* as it is known in the industry, it is ready for the second phase.

Step two: Germination

Over anything from four to six days, the grain is left to germinate. It's kept at a constant and cool temperature and regularly turned to avoid too much moisture or heat and to stop each grain's individual roots from attaching themselves to their neighbours'. This is when all kinds of brewing goodies are formulated, including the starches which will later be converted to fermentable sugars during the brewing process.

Before the malted barley can be shipped to brewers large and small, the grain has to be dried, which takes us to the final step in the process for most pale malts.

Step three: Kilning

Maltsters don't want the grain to continue sprouting, so heat is used to halt the process until the malt finds its way into the brew kettle, when our first beer ingredient, water, will rekindle the process and reactivate the enzymes.

The kilns, kept at around 76 °C, have a dual use, their other purpose being to dry the now malted barley. If there's too much moisture, the grain will simply rot, while successfully malted barley can be kept for months, if not years. Kilning gives malt its characteristic sweet, biscuit-like flavour that sets it featuring in a range of chocolate bars as well as in your pint glass.

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