

BOTANICO

WINE & BEER GARDEN

With amber ales, chocolate stouts and hoppy India pale ales on tap, poured cold and served alongside artisan beer cheese at Biergarten-style tables, Botanico feels out of place – in the best possible way – in Cambodia. Tucked away amid overgrown trees and potted palms, the capital's newest craft beer haven is a world away from surrounding streets plastered with neon-lit Angkor signs.

Opened at the end of February as the new face for Cerevisia Craft Brewhouse, the beer garden is emblematic of the rise in craft beer across the Kingdom. "People come here because they want something different," says founding partner Erich Phillips of the specialty beers.

Cerevisia, which started brewing in 2013, has in many ways led the craft charge. Starting as a wholesaler out of founding partner and brewmaster Chad Richman's home, the company has since expanded to a separate brewhouse and now bar, and supplies a dozen eateries and watering holes with the company's mainstays – American pale ale and Irish Red. "We're part of the leading edge," says Phillips.

Tapping the Market

But Cerevisia is not the only player in the brewing game. Thailand-chain Spark and Tawandang German Microbrewery offers lager, weizen and dunkel beer, and Munich Microbrewery serves up the company's signature brew fermented with malt, houblon and yeast. Further afield, Sihanoukville's Five Men brewery – run by a German-trained Cambodian brewmaster – creates pale ales and stouts, and retails bottled beer and kegs. And in Kampot, Rumblefish opts for a different approach by brewing craft ginger beer.

At Phnom Penh's Himawari Microbrewery, large silver vats used to boil, cool and ferment beer are visible behind the high wooden bar hosting hotel guests,

expats and locals. Operating since 2012, Himawari has four craft mainstays – the light Aspara Gold pale ale, malty Jem and Jade pale ale, IPA-esque Centenniale and not-too-bitter Oats stout.

"There are more and more people interested in craft beer," says the hotel's marketing and events manager, Melissa Seet. She adds that visitors often want to drink something unique to the country, but up until recently have only had the typical Anchor and Cambodia options available. "The great thing about microbrewery is it is made in Cambodia, but you're able to taste that kind of quality and freshness." In response to the demand, Himawari is now wholesaling and bottling for some of the city's bars and restaurants.

Botanico, too, is a natural outcome of growth, as Cerevisia saw a need for a place to supply more experimental beers and better connect with customers to get feedback. "It represents what's happening in the craft industry," says Bob Oudemans, founding partner of the beer garden. "There's a maturity of the sector, a level of sophistication."

Art Perfected

While growth in the sector is welcome, individual breweries say they are limiting volume intentionally to maintain the craftsmanship. "Craft brewery by design is a relatively small batch, capable of moving from style to style," says Richman. "The focus is not on production volume; it's on quality. It's about bringing something new to the table." Already, Cerevisia is at capacity, with a waiting list of 30 restaurants.

"When you brew a beer, you have to give it time to rest and for all the ingredients to ferment, so we don't rush things," adds Seet. "If we're out, we're out."

Staying small allows Cerevisia to be more experimental, and soon they plan to test out new offerings such as a local coconut porter and jasmine IPA. Over the

years, the team has rolled out 60 beers ranging from heavy to light, to appeal to a wide spectrum of customers, from those who want a "sessionable" beer to those who "want something that's going to blow their socks off", says Phillips. But slightly larger Himawari sticks to the basics of using malt and hops, to avoid inconsistencies between batches, and rolls out a new beer every six months.

And though the industry's rise means additional competition, this is embraced among brewers. Due to limited production, supply chains for imported ingredients – from New Zealand, Germany and the US – remain a challenge, particularly with taxes. "There are no economies of scale," says Seet, adding even bottles, caps and glasses need to be bought from outside. According to Phillips, synergies in the sector would help overcome these problems.

Hopportunity Calling

While craft beer has been heartily embraced among expats looking for a taste of home, breaking into the local market has been more challenging. "Cambodia is underserved; we do want to build that community," says Phillips, adding Khmer restaurants are their priority for expansion. Cerevisia wants to do further research into which craft beers will have greatest local appeal. "There are beer snobs that say, you can't put ice in your beer. [But] drink it however you want."

Himawari is also seeking a local market, particularly to have a more steady output rather than relying on the influx of tourists. As an entry point to this audience, the brewery offers a sampler of its four mainstays at a lower cost (\$3.99).

But until craft beer becomes more of a Khmer mainstay, brewers maintain that the budding industry is an important contributor to the local economy. "It's not about profitability; it's about sustainability," says Phillips. "It's only going to grow." ❧