

Cambodia

# ASIA LIFE

02/2015  
ISSUE 98

# CITY ESCAPE

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# Ask

## Chad Richman

Phnom Penh's beer scene is brewing up surprises, with craft beer now available around town from Cerevisia Craft Brewhouse. Writer **Joanna Mayhew** speaks with founding partner and brewmaster Chad Richman to find out what's on tap. Photography by **Charles Fox**.

### What does Craft offer in Phnom Penh?

We currently have three mainstay beers: American pale ale, IPA and Irish Red. We have a couple of regular specialty beers that we wholesale. On top of that, we have our nomad line, [where] we'll serve unique beers [to] see if there's enough interest [to] bring them online. We wholesale kegs to local restaurants [and] private individuals for parties. We also will set up draft systems for homes. Our business [model] is educating the public—on beer, because we like beer and want to share.

### What makes craft brewing unique?

Craft brewery by design is a relatively small batch, capable of moving from style to style, beer to beer. The focus is not on production volume; it's on quality. It's about bringing something new to the table. It's [also] about trying to foster a sense of collaborative business within the community, whether using local products, generating jobs, [or] innovating designs that are sustainable. A good example would be the way our grains are handled once we've made beer. [The] used barley is still capable of providing nutrition. We donate it to a local farm; they feed it to their chickens, use it in fertiliser. One of the ethos behind Craft is that sustainability and community focus.

### How did you start brewing beer?

I first brewed beer in Iraq, in a town formerly known as Babylon, [which] is the homeland of beer. I got into exploring the foundations of pre-Iraqi Iraqi culture and came across beer. I looked to see what the local grains were, and I made a very bad product we all loved drinking. I've brewed beer at least once a week since then. I'm very anal retentive, which lends itself well to brewing. I have a bit of an artistic background; I like to innovate. I took a lot of satisfaction in the fact that every time I made beer, my friends loved it. I took selfish pride in making people happy by having them get drunk off of something I made.

### What's the trick to making good beer?

Love and cleanliness. Brewing is about being sanitary. It's easy to make good beer, it's easy to make bad beer—the distinction is sanitation. When you're designing the beer, art takes a front seat. There's a little science involved, but it's mostly art. In the duplication phase, it's almost 100 percent science with very little art, which we just call margin of error. Some mistakes lead to better beer. [And] nothing replaces love. You can be the most educated brewer in the world, but if you don't love what you're doing, and you don't have

experience, then your beer's not going to speak to people. I don't need [my beer] to be better than anyone else's beer; I don't need it to win awards. I just want people to enjoy it.

### What is the state of beer here?

Cambodia is unique in many ways. Beer is one of them. When you look at the gross domestic product, the population and what they spend their money on, there's more beer here than there should be. German-style lagers dominate the market in Southeast Asia. [But] there's a lot of demand for ales. [We're bringing] unique hand-crafted ale—American, Belgium, British styles. The trick in craft brewing is quality control. The trick in Phnom Penh is giving someone a product they know they can get again.

### Are there challenges to growth?

We could take money from big investors, to take this market by storm. But we can't do that without sacrificing our core values or the beer itself. I'm not doing it for money; I'm doing it because I love beer. [Co-founder] Erich [Phillips] and I have done the lion's share of the initial work, along with our good friend and my wife. And no one's been paid a single cent for any beer we've sold. Erich and I have paid for the privilege of serving you beer. We have a model that is profitable, but we're not willing to

force that too fast. If our beer sucks, our reputation does too.

### Is there a market among Cambodians for craft beer?

Because what's served is typically German-style beers or Czech-style pilsners, people draw the conclusion that since Westerners like to drink a light, sessionable lager, everyone else does too when it's hot. That ethnocentric point of view is very pervasive. But it's a total fallacy. We are continuously surprised by the number of Khmer customers. There's definitely a market; the big catch is money. We can't brew our beers at a price we can compete with the local breweries. We're not in Khmer outlets yet, but that's a focus.

### What's next?

First and foremost, make the brewery self-sustaining, so that Erich and I can stop paying for the privilege of bringing you beer. Also so we can hire people and teach them [to be] brewers. We've talked about going into other parts of Cambodia, and then maybe outside. But we're focused on making this a permanent fixture [first]. The goal isn't making the brewery big enough to sell in other places. It's making a model here that works so well we can duplicate it [elsewhere], or help other people duplicate it, so that more people can have local craft beer. ☑

