

Jim McCabe

Founder, Milwaukee Brewing Company



Jim McCabe founded the Milwaukee Ale House in 1997, after getting hooked on brewpubs out West. He added a production brewery, the Milwaukee Brewing Company, a decade later. The brewery's portfolio is broad, running from an old-school Amber, to a lemongrass white IPA, sours, barrel-aged recipes, and beers infused with tea; what unites them all is a push to connect the craft movement with Milwaukee's beermaking tradition. "People are looking for new flavors voraciously, they're willing to try things from all over the country, but there's loyalty there if you're delivering. The challenge for every brewer is: How do you develop loyalty? Wisconsin is a very loyal place. People like brands they can identify with and be proud of."

1 Get some culture

Milwaukee's drinking culture grabbed hold of Jim McCabe as soon as he landed in town at Marquette University at age 18. "Beer culture is such a part of the fabric of the city, and the history of it," McCabe says. Back then, in the 1980s, Milwaukee's beer culture revolved around a handful of macrobreweries. McCabe got hooked on craft beer while traveling to Oregon and Colorado for his job in engineering. He fell in love with the beers themselves, and with the scale of the engineering behind the systems the beers were brewed on. "I thought, oh my God, we're a beer town, we have to do this!" McCabe recalls.

2 Geek out

McCabe jumped from homebrewing to commercial brewing 17 years ago, when he opened the Milwaukee Ale House. From the beginning, McCabe planned to scale the Ale House brewpub up into a full-scale production brewery—partly because Wisconsin's liquor laws put him on that path, partly because he had trouble finding contract brewers who could reliably handle the Ale House's growth, but mostly because industrial-scale brewing excites the engineering geek in him. "The production side was always my dream," he says. "Three of our brewers have culinary backgrounds. I can see the mechanical things, and foster the creative elements of what they're trying to do."

3 Back to the future

Milwaukee's drinking scene used to revolve around mega-brands like Miller and Pabst. "People would get into fights over it," McCabe recalls. "You wouldn't think of waving a Bud around downtown Milwaukee. You don't see that kind of intensity anymore. But we're still a beer town, it is integral to our culture and history." McCabe is among a wave of Milwaukee brewers who have hitched the city's cultural connections to brewing and drinking to the craft brewing movement. He pushed this process along, in part, by grounding his recipes in local history: Polish Moon, his Milk Stout, was designed

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to celebrate a clock tower that rises above an old working-class neighborhood, while Increase Wheat, a Berliner Weisse, is named after Increase Lapham, the explorer who first mapped Wisconsin, and is flavored with local gooseberries.

4 Step it up

The relationship between Milwaukee Brewing and the Milwaukee Ale House flows two ways—Milwaukee Brewing churns out production runs of flagship brews pioneered at the Ale House, and McCabe's brewers use the Ale House's smaller brewing system to make test runs of new recipes they're considering for full production. Frequently, though, ambitious recipes don't even make it to an Ale House tap until they've been refined in 5-gallon homebrew batches. Increase Wheat, the gooseberry Berliner, started with a round of experimental homebrew batches. So did O-Gii, an Imperial Witbier infused with tea; the recipe took nearly a year of work at home and on the Ale House system to dial in. In both cases, McCabe believes, a long runway produced a better beer.

5 Mix it up

Milwaukee Brewing has carved out a niche brewing beers infused with tea. O-Gii, the imperial Wit, is brewed with green and chamomile teas. Hop Freak IPA marries citrusy hops with jasmine tea. An earl gray IPA uses that tea like a bittering hop. And Milwaukee's Christmas beer swaps out the expected holiday spices for plum tea. The tea experiments began when Rishi Tea, a local supplier, was using McCabe's brewery to cook up chai concentrate. "In their world, they do these tastings they call cup-pings. We just call it drinking beer. They'd bring in all these exotic teas, and we'd start blending them, mixing them with beers, playing around with it."

6 Just try it

O-Gii, the tea-infused imperial Wit, started in Milwaukee brewer Kurt Mayes' kitchen. That first batch missed the mark, but the brewery crew was intrigued by the weird vision Mayes was chasing, so he kept after it. The finished product amps a traditional Witbier base up over 9 percent ABV, taking the edge off high alcohol levels with heaps of orange peel and coriander. Green tea, chamomile and chopped ginger steep in the beer after fermentation. "The chamomile and the yeast interact on the nose," McCabe says. "Then you get the Belgian spice wave, and then the green tea hits two-thirds of the way through. The ginger rolls through the whole thing. It all helps balance off the alcohol. It sounds disgusting to a lot of people who read that, but you've got to try it."



7 Celebrate a throwback

Louie's Demise is the beer that built Milwaukee Brewing. It's a two-decade-old homebrew recipe that has long been the brewery's top seller. The recipe was a stylistic outsider when McCabe first started brewing it, and it's miles away from the juicy, tropical flavor profiles many brewers are flocking to today. An Amber Ale that's hopped like an Altbier, Louie's Demise also mixes things up with a shot of faintly sour honey malt in the mash. "It's one of the beers that helped transition a lot of people around here to craft beer, but it's definitely not shy," McCabe says. "The ingredients are definitely old school. I love the cool kid hops, Mosaic and Citra and Simcoe, but there's still a place for these forgotten hops."

8 Only the strong survive

Hop Happy IPA became Milwaukee Brewing's main-line IPA by emerging from a year of trial by combat: Brewers threw a dozen different IPA recipes at Ale House customers, with the best-received beer finally going into production. Hop Happy is a citrusy, deceptively beefy change of pace from Milwaukee Brewing's Amber flagship. It's a toasty, malty brew, with a body fortified by oats, and a pound of hops (mainly Centennial and Columbus) per barrel. "It's not a one-malt, one-hop beer, that's for sure. We did a couple of those. But this was, by far, more interesting."

9 Do something different

McCabe's team cooked up Sasquash Porter, a fall seasonal loaded with sweet potatoes, because they wanted an adjunct-heavy fall seasonal, but didn't want to step on the toes of the Lakefront Brewery across town. "We've known those guys forever. They've been making their Pumpkin Lager for years. That's their thing. It's their world. And there are plenty of other beers to make." Sasquash spins the fall-harvest-as-beer genre off in another direction, adding 800 pounds of grilled sweet potatoes to a chocolatey, robust Porter recipe. There is pumpkin lingering in the beer's background. But mostly, it's dry, roasty and grilled. It tastes like fall.

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