



Too bad hurricanes don't skip good beer towns.

New Orleans

BREWING UP A STORM words: Jacob McKean

NEW ORLEANS MAY BE THE COUNTRY'S MOST ACCOMMODATING DRINKING CITY. Legal public drinking makes the city an awesome environment to enjoy a beer, and visitors can take in world-class street music, gorgeous 19th century architecture, and a warm, tropical climate all with their preferred adult beverage in hand. Bars have no mandatory closing time, so if the party's still going, the drinks keep flowing. And unlike most cities, where liquor licenses are in limited supply or dribble out from puritanical bureaucracies, New Orleans gives them out like beads from a Mardi Gras float, with the result being that you can get a drink almost anywhere, anytime.

Yet talking about New Orleans as a "beer city" is a challenge. Many visitors come to New Orleans with beer drinking in mind, but they don't necessarily come for the

beer itself. You see, the Crescent City is utterly awash in beer, but finding anything other than the same four taps (or hand grenade-shaped booze bombs) can be a challenge.

Fortunately, a handful of off-the-beaten path establishments—known mostly to suds-centric locals—dole out the good stuff. And since beers can be consumed anywhere (as long as they're not in glass containers), NOLA bars and liquor stores are more like coffee shops, with some even putting larger "to-go" orders into empty six-packs for your carrying convenience. It's a great way to walk around America's most bewitching city: pop in to a bar, order a beer, and head right back out, cup in hand.



STILL IN RECOVERY

New Orleans was once one of the great brewing cities in America, boasting over 30 local breweries in the early part of the 1900s. But prohibition put many of them out of business, and consolidation in the brewing industry slowly shuttered most of the rest.

Like everything else in the Crescent City, the beer scene was badly damaged when Hurricane Katrina struck in the summer of 2005. The levees protecting the city failed to hold up to the storm surge, and many homes, businesses, and lives were washed away. Signs of the storm's fury are still evident in many parts of the city, although the French Quarter and all major tourist destinations have completely recovered.



Dixie Brewing Company, post Katrina.

Among the losses were the city's only brewery, its sole homebrew store, and a great bottle shop, none of which have returned. Fortunately, other businesses are starting to step in to replace some of the important sites in the city's once great beer culture.

BEER TO THE RESCUE

One of those new businesses is the New Orleans Lager & Ale (N.O.L.A.) Brewing Company, an embryonic enterprise that is seeking to become the first functioning commercial brewery in the city since Katrina. The brewery is the brainchild of Kirk Coco, a native New Orleanian and former Navy officer who returned to his hometown to help rebuild after the storm.

Coco plugged into the city's vibrant homebrewing scene, where he met Peter Caddoo, who before Katrina had been brewmaster at Dixie Brewing Company for 18 years. Caddoo was working at a restaurant at the time and occupying himself with his world-class homebrews when Coco came knocking.

"I was skeptical of the whole idea at first," says Caddoo. "But there's a lot of people in this city who like drinking good beer and take pride in supporting local products." Driven by a desire to do something positive for the city when many people were giving up on it, Caddoo got on board.

Coco and Caddoo have just begun setting up their brewing equipment at the warehouse on the Mississippi River that will be their brewery's home. They plan to release their first two beers, a brown ale and a blond ale, by the end of the year.

Caddoo says of the beers, which are based on his beloved homebrew recipes, "They've got plenty of flavor, but they're light enough that you can drink a lot of them without passing out in the summer," an important consideration in the oppressive heat of southern Louisiana.

New Orleans beer aficionados are excited by the prospect of homegrown microbrews on tap in local establishments. If NOLA Brewing is a success, it will go a long way towards proving that New Orleans is ready to become a cosmopolitan beer city once again.



GARY LOVERDE



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Ever buy a beer "to go" and drink it on the way out?

Does a British flag always mean "beer sold here?" We think so.



GARY LOVERDE



GARY LOVERDE



BREWING UP BUSINESS

About forty-five miles north of New Orleans, on the other side of the soupy expanse of Lake Pontchartrain, lies the small town of Abita Springs. True to its name, the town is known as a source of remarkably pure spring water, and since 1986, as the home of the Abita Brewing Company, which has risen from humble origins to become the 17th largest craft brewery in the country today.

Producing just 1,500 barrels in its first year, Abita now sends over half of its 75,000 barrels to New Orleans, where it outsells macro giants Miller and Coors. The brewery draws directly from the town's ancient water supply for its beer, a rarity in an age when adjusting water chemistry is an industry norm.

While the brewery has experienced double-digit growth in recent years, David Blossman, the president of Abita Brewing Company, says he's committed to staying true to Abita's unique way of doing business. Rather than focusing purely on expansion, Blossman says the brewery recently invested in capturing methane gas from its wastewater treatment system as part of an overall effort to make the brewery more environmentally sustainable. "We're not going to compromise our principles to grow," asserts Blossman.

The brewery was only lightly damaged in Hurricane Katrina, but the weeklong absence of electricity led to the loss of 1,000 barrels of beer and a two-week shutdown. But the greater challenge came from their main customer base. "Having New Orleans underwater affected our business in a big way," recalls Blossman.

Two days after the storm, Blossman and his brewing team decided to make a new beer to aid reconstruction efforts across the Gulf Coast. The brewery donated \$4 to hurricane relief efforts for every case of the new golden ale—christened Fleur de Lis Restoration Ale—it sold. Rushed to market only five weeks after the storm hit, the beer was an instant success; in two years, the brewery raised \$550,000 dollars.

With Abita rising to new heights of popularity and New Orleans coming back in a big way, Blossman is optimistic about the future of brewing in Southern Louisiana. "There's a big beer culture here, there just aren't many breweries. We have savvy consumers, so hopefully there will be more," he says.

Top Five Places To Get A Beer in New Orleans:

- 1 STEIN'S DELI**
 2207 Magazine Street
 (504) 527-0771
www.steinsdeli.net
 This inconspicuous gourmet deli is home to the best beer cooler in the city—grab a mixed six-pack and go.
- 2 SYDNEY'S WINE CELLAR**
 917 Decatur Street
 (504) 524-6872
 Located in the heart of the French Quarter, this liquor store with a very good beer selection will let you pour your beer in a to-go cup on your way out the door.
- 3 D.B.A.**
 618 Frenchman Street
 (504) 942-3731
www.drinkgoodstuff.com/no/default.asp
 Great live music, plenty of tap lines, and an import-heavy bottle selection make this a great place to spend the evening.
- 4 BEER FEST**
 409 Bourbon Street and 630 Bourbon Street
 (504) 525-2222 and (504) 525-3010
 With 40 beers on tap and two locations on Bourbon Street, this is the place to go when you find yourself on America's most notorious thoroughfare.
- 5 CLUB DECATUR**
 240 Decatur Street
 (504) 581-6969
 A divey old-school bar near most major French Quarter hotels, Club Decatur has well-selected tap lines and small pizza counter tucked in the back.