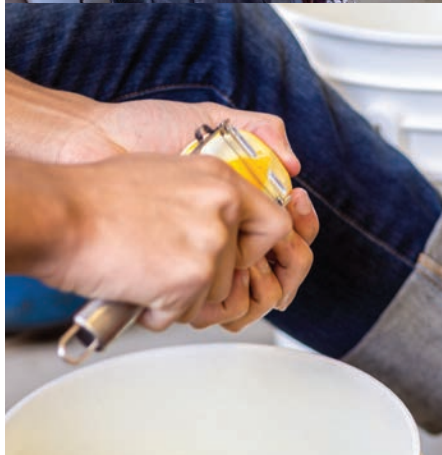




Finders Keepers

In today's craft brewing culture, the concept of *terroir* is growing more and more important. We set out to explore how several craft brewers in Los Angeles are adding that sense of place to their beers in unexpected ways.

By John Michael Verive





This page » Bob Kunz of Highland Park Brewery samples a “yard beer” made with ingredients foraged on his mile-long walk from home to work. **Previous page »** Kunz collects and preps ingredients for the sour season with foraged ingredients. **Opposite page »** Collecting ingredients from the surrounding neighborhood gives Highland Park’s Yard Beer a sense of terroir.

A dozen miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles, in the sage-scented hills below the San Gabriel Mountains, a brewer walks with a purpose. Founder of Pasadena's Craftsman Brewing, Mark Jilg is a trailblazer of artisanal beer in Los Angeles, and Craftsman started making distinctive beers long before craft beer caught on in the region.

Triple White Sage is a yearly signature brew that captures the “rather assertive aroma” of the chaparral woodlands, and Jilg forages the hills for the Belgian ale’s key ingredient. “I used to spend a lot of time mountain biking in the Front Range [of the Angeles National Forest],” Jilg explains. “And I have a lot of familiarity with the flora—and the aromas—of the foothills.”

Before 2010—when the new wave of craft producers hit the L.A. area—there were only a scattered handful of brewpubs and small breweries. Many new operations now cater to the shifting tastes of thirsty Angelenos, but the veterans at Craftsman hold their course. The brewery makes two distinct families of beer: expertly executed examples of classic styles (“four-ingredient beers”) and more esoteric brews. These “complicated beers” are often wood-aged and feature local ingredients. Jilg wants his beers to be expressive and authentic. He forages for ingredients to create a connection with the environment. Jilg has worked with spruce and even acorns, but it was Southern California’s ubiquitous citrus that compelled him to add a sense of place to his beer. “I have two really old Valencia orange trees in my backyard,” he says, “and that sort of got the ball rolling on taking advantage of the bounty of Los Angeles.”

Brewers have searched their surroundings for flavors for as long as there’s been beer to brew. In the modern craft-beer culture, where anything goes and everything old is new again, the trend is on the rise. It’s a trend that Jilg implies is often more about marketing than authenticity. In Los Angeles, where authenticity is often in short supply, brewers forage for inspiration and a bond with the land. They are discov-

ering some unexpected connections—to both the environment and their neighbors.

Serendipity

Bob Kunz has a small brewery in the backroom of a hip bar in one of L.A.’s historic neighborhoods, and he makes beer for his neighbors in Highland Park. Years ago he was an assistant brewer at Craftsman, and Mark Jilg’s influence on the young brewer is clear. They both talk about beer with the same determined romance. As at Craftsman, the brews at Highland Park Brewery fall into two camps: “predictable beer, where we try to control all of the parameters, and unpredictable beers where we embrace it having a life of its own,” says Kunz.

“It is a fun thing. Maybe you don’t engineer it as much. You try to think about [how you can] use [your] geography to [your] advantage.”

One Highland Park brew that takes advantage of spring’s bounty in Los Angeles is Yard Beer. Using botanicals gathered from Kunz’s mile-long walk between his home and the brewery, the beer captures the scents of a spring morning in the verdant community. For the 2015 batch, Kunz planned to add lemon grass, sour-grass flower, and limes to a kettle-soured saison dosed with *Brettanomyces*.

“Urban foraging is kind of a funny thing,” Kunz quipped as he set off on his meandering stroll to gather the items on his list.





Primitive beer using mugwort, elderflowers, organic cane brown sugar, maple syrup (tree sap), and lemon ants for flavors. This beer was custom-made for mixologist Matthew Biancaniello.



Primitive brew using only lerp sugar (insect excretion), mugwort, fermented lemons, and yarrow.



Primitive carbonation in a wild beer using a bow on the gourd (basically a primitive flip-top bottle) to keep the pressure on.

L.A.'s Wildest Brewer

Professional forager **Pascal Baudar** pushes the limits of foraged "beer."

Experimenting with foraged ingredients in beer is an exciting creative exercise, but for Pascal Baudar, foraging is a way of life. Born in Belgium, Baudar grew up close to the land and learned how to find—and use—wild edibles at an early age. He now calls Los Angeles home, and as a professional forager he teaches classes on wild edibles, self-sufficiency, and foraging practices, and he supplies foraged ingredients to some of L.A.'s hottest, hippest bars and restaurants. But finding the wild flavors growing throughout the hills and valleys in Southern California is only a part of Baudar's mission. He's as passionate about traditional preservation techniques as he is about foraging, and fermentation is one of his favorite ways to preserve the bounty of plants (and bugs) that he finds. He connects to the past and to the land with his foraged beers.

"I use the term 'beer' very loosely," he says—his speech tinged with *l'accent Belge*. "If my beverage tastes like a beer, I call it a beer." His beverages—wines, ciders, and sodas in addition to wild ales—are often created with only the ingredients that he finds on his walks, and that means no barley and no hops. To Baudar, flavor profile and the spirit of the land are more important than the name of the finished product. It is a tie to historical brewing traditions. "It's like very old beer," he says. "Vikings and Celts used lots of plants [in their brews]." Some of Baudar's brews have featured more than seventy different

foraged plants including wild mushrooms, nettles, mugwort, and even ants. The botanicals are boiled with a variety of different fermentable sugar sources including tree saps, honey, and something called lerp sugar—the crystallized secretions of aphid-like insects. The yeast is all wild (he often uses wild elderberries to start fermentation), and the fermentation happens in specially made clay vessels (or sometimes in whatever glass bottles he has laying around).

Many of his brews are reminiscent of the gueuzes and lambics of his native Belgium—funky and tart. "It takes a tremendous amount of research, and a lot of practice to learn to use these ingredients," he says, adding, "I've done it so often [that] I know all the mistakes." But his definition of mistake is narrow, and he says that batches that don't taste the way he'd like get turned into vinegar or used to cook with instead of being dumped. "I've never had a beer go bad in seven years!"

Baudar teaches a variety of wilderness-based classes, including wild beer making (visit urbanoutdoorskills.com for details), and he suggests that homebrewers interested in exploring their locally available wild flavors should find a mentor who knows their region. "It's very hard to [learn] from a book," he says and suggests that the intrepid brewers should stick to plants they know, but he also encourages brewers to forge a connection with the land and the bounty of nature through exploration.

"It's about going back to the original idea of brewing. Primitive and fantastically simple."

PHOTOS: PASCAL BAUDAR

“Urban foraging is kind of a funny thing,” Kunz quipped as he set off to gather the items on his list. “You’re just in a concrete city, but there are all these plants and vegetation [if you look]. It’s right there: the edible landscape.”



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But foraging is never a sure thing. After harvesting lemongrass from his own yard and stuffing a bag until it overflowed with the sour-grass flower that had taken over his business partner’s lawn, the urban forager came up short on the citrus. The trees he’d planned to harvest had been under-ripe and he only managed a handful of scrawny limes. Disappointed, the typically unflappable Kunz grew quiet for a few blocks and pondered what adjustments would salvage the brew. Then a chance meeting with Carlito saved the day.

Walking past a bushy citrus tree in a fenced yard, Kunz perked up when he spied a lemon dangling off a branch that overhung the sidewalk (making it fair-game for foraging). He plucked the fruit just as the homeowner poked his head out from under the hood of a car in the driveway. Instead of reprimanding the brewer, the man opened his gate and welcomed Kunz to gather more. Which trees to focus on in Carlito’s orchard-like yard was sorted out in a jumble of Spanish and English, and soon a shopping bag was brimming with oranges, Meyer lemons, and limes.

“There’s something about pounding the pavement—just getting out and walking,” Kunz says at the end of the journey. “You don’t experience the same sights and smells, or interactions, when you’re in the car.”

Back at the brewery Kunz washed the herbs and zested the citrus before adding it all to a ferocious Vitamix blender. He added the resulting vivid green and pungent slurry to the 7-barrel batch of tart saison. The beer was tapped a week or so later, and it’s aroma was remarkable. The botanicals added a brightness to the edgy tartness and earthy *Brett* character. It tasted like spring.

Backyard Harvests

On the other side of Los Angeles, Brewmaster Jonathan Porter and his wife, Laurie Porter, opened a production brewery in Torrance in 2013, and foraged ingredients are in Smog City Brewing’s DNA. Using local flavors is about “defining who we are as a brewery and redefining the rules,” Laurie Porter says. Their foraging projects

are a way to develop a connection to their community and the environment, and the beers capture local flavors such as the piquant scent of the fennel flowers that dot the hillsides above the coast (and the alley behind the Porter’s house).

There is also a kumquat tree in the Porter’s backyard, and it wasn’t long before the ornamental citrus found its way into a brew. The first 55-gallon batch of Kumquat Saison used more than fifty pounds of pureed fruit, and it was a runaway hit in the taproom. This year, the Porters wanted to brew a full-sized production, but the 15-barrel batch would require almost 500 pounds of the tiny citrus. It would take more than the Porter’s backyard tree to produce that many kumquats.

Commercially grown kumquats, they discovered, are too sweet. They were after the tartness of the more characterful fruit from backyard trees. Like Bob Kunz’s fortuitous run-in with Carlito, a chance meeting led to a source for the citrus. At a wedding, Laurie Porter met Rachel Maysel, the Backyard Harvest Manager of Food Forward. The L.A. nonprofit organization “rescues” unsold produce from farmer’s markets across Los Angeles, re-routing the would-be waste to food banks and shelters. Food Forward also organizes hundreds of volunteer-run backyard harvests that collect fruit from the bountiful citrus trees on private property around the region. They had access to a large surplus of kumquats, and the two organizations partnered to create Kumquat Saison.

It was a logistical challenge, but Food Forward Founder Rick Nahmias says, “All our fruit donors and volunteers were canvassed ahead of time to take part in this special project, knowing that instead of feeding the hungry as all our other harvests do, this small amount of fruit would be a fundraiser.” In return for almost 800 pounds of kumquats that Smog City would receive from Food Forward, the brewery would specially distribute bottles of the beer to the area where many of the trees were found to raise money for the nonprofit.

“It’s a lot of love that’s gone into this batch,” Maysel says.

Right» The Food Forward and Smog City Brewing teams harvest kumquats from a backyard tree. The urban citrus is less sweet and has more character than commercially farmed varieties.



Homebrewing with Foraged Ingredients

Not everyone has easy access to an abundance of wild edibles or a plot of land that they can cultivate for interesting brewing ingredients, but any adventurous brewer can still imbue his or her beers with local flavors. You just have to think like a forager.

Shop Like a Forager

Foraging doesn't have to mean hunting through the wilderness; you can discover interesting flavors to add to your brews in plenty of urban locations. Farmer's markets are a wonderful source of local ingredients, and ethnic groceries can provide a bounty of novel fruits, herbs, and spices that you might not find at the local mega-mart. Of course, the supermarket's produce section might have some interesting finds, too. Keep your eyes (and your nose) open.

Smell and Taste Everything

You can't showcase the flavors of your surroundings without a deep understanding of what's around you. Both Highland Park Brewery's Bob Kunz and Smog City Brewing's Jonathan Porter are inveterate samplers. They can't walk down the block or through a market without careful observation—and they smell (and sometimes taste) everything that catches their eye.

Know Your Styles

For Jonathan Porter, a deep understanding of the flavor profiles of a wide variety of beer styles is critical when using foraged ingredients. He says balance is the most critical concept when deciding what style would best showcase an ingredient, and knowing how to best contrast malt, hops, or fermentation flavors with different botanicals comes with practice and experimentation.

Take a Class or Read a Book

Even if you have access to a forest or wild area, it might not be prudent to go stomping into the woods without basic knowledge of what's safe to eat. Check with local outdoor retailers, hiking clubs, or even culinary schools and community colleges to see whether classes on wild edibles are offered in your area. A little knowledge goes a long way, and learning from someone can be inspiring.

Connect with Other Foragers

Find a local group of urban foragers with whom you can share information and finds. Falling Fruit (fallingfruit.org) is a collaborative map of the urban harvest that points to more than a half-million food sources around the world (from plants and fungi to water wells and dumpsters). The rapidly growing user community is actively exploring, editing, and adding to the map.

Experiment

There are no hard and fast rules about when in the brewing process to add foraged ingredients. Some plants will be best showcased late in the boil, while more delicate flavors might be best when added after fermentation. Try different methods and take good notes. You also don't have to commit to a full-sized batch of beer to use local flavors. Making a tea or tincture of botanicals is an excellent way to test flavor combinations and work out how much of an ingredient to use.



Brewers at Smog City Brewing purée kumquats picked from urban fruit trees in Los Angeles.

"The whole staff has gotten involved and passionate about it," Nahmias adds, "Beer is a real connector for our Food Forward community. We're hopeful this is the first of an ongoing collaboration."

Smog City's Kumquat Saison made its official debut at the Food Forward Spring Melt fund-raising dinner in April, and the Porters were on hand to pour the collaborative brew. The beer was delicately tart with an intense citrus flavor balanced against the earthy character of the saison yeast. It was full of flavor, yet eminently drinkable, and the crowd response was overwhelmingly positive.

"This might be my favorite beer we've ever brewed. I could drink it always," Laurie Porter said before telling a story of one harvest she helped with. It was a decades-old backyard tree that an avid homebrewer had planted. Each year he had made his own kumquat beer, but he'd recently passed away. His widow and daughter were present for the pick that yielded 250 pounds of fruit, and they said their husband and father would be proud to know kumquats from that old tree were still getting made into beer.

Sharing a Goal

While the beer industry in Los Angeles may be underdeveloped, brewers who look beyond established paths and who bring dedication and creativity to the scene are helping it catch up fast.

For Mark Jilg, place is as important an ingredient as barley, hops, or water. His quest for authenticity and creative expression has fueled decades of experimentation with local flavors. Bob Kunz highlights local flavors as a way to establish ties between his young brewery and the changing neighborhood where he lives and works. Jonathan and Laurie Porter define their brand through a tireless search for exciting flavor combinations. Different as they are, all three breweries share a goal: They want to share the abundance of natural flavors that grow around and throughout Los Angeles with the swelling crowd of craft-beer fans in L.A.'s developing scene.

The Porters have moved from their old home and had to leave behind the kumquat tree and the fennel, but their new home holds possibilities that excite Laurie Porter. She's already purchased almost an orchard's worth of citrus trees, and she says of her new neighborhood, "The landscape is so different. Who knows what [flavors] we'll find."

