

# Hot

Anchor Steam's  
historic roots and  
delicious future

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Photos by Amy Widdowson

# Anchor Steam

First came the steam engine, then refrigeration, and then lager beer... and lager beer became damn popular. Shortly after the California Gold Rush, the pioneers gave the world steam beer. You see, lager beer is aged briefly, or "lagged" at cold temperatures. But there was no refrigeration yet in San Francisco in the 1850s.

So the brewers tried making lager beer without refrigeration — at ale temperatures. At first it was a total flop. By the time the hot brew of hops and barley cooled, wild yeasts and other buggers had gotten in and spoiled the batch before the lager-style yeasts could be added. Some nameless, innovative brewer came up with "cool ships": long shallow pans into which the beer was poured, allowing the wort (unfermented beer) to cool much more rapidly. Once the temperature had dropped to where the lager



little microbial lives creating alcohol.

This beer, made with lager yeasts and fermented at ale temperatures, came to be called steam beer. Some said watching the beer ferment in cool ships was like watching steam, or that the vats could be seen steaming as they cooled in the cold San Francisco air. But the most widely accepted story is that the beer earned its title due to its copious carbonation. Published in 1902, Wahl and Heinus' *American Handy Book of Malting and Brewing* says, "The beer is largely consumed throughout the state of California. It is called steam beer on account of its highly effervescing properties and the amount of pressure it has in the trade packages."

California had its steam beer, which has turned out to be one of few styles of beer invented in America, and now is technically classified as "California common beer." There were maybe fifty breweries churning out beer at the time, including Golden City Brewery. Owned

by German brewmaster Gottlieb Brekle, it was sold in 1896 to Ernst F. Baruth and his son-in-law Otto Schinkel Jr. and the business was renamed Anchor Brewing. The miners, pioneers, and sailors drank beer and the breweries made money, until two evils befell the world of beer: prohibition and industrialization.

Prohibition wiped out a rich tradition of brewing across America. Distributors went bankrupt, and the passage of knowledge between brewmasters nearly ceased, eradicating refined recipes and techniques. No one is sure how Anchor Brewing survived these dark times — at least no one's talking. It is possible they produced root beer and other soda-pops. More likely, in a city famous for its indomitable lawlessness, they were able to turn a trade on the black market.

At any rate, Anchor got back to brewing steam beer in 1933 after the repeal of prohibition only to face the scourge of industrialization a few years later, furthered by the massive production

efforts of the World Wars. America had gotten very much in the habit of making thousands and thousands of the same thing, whether that was tanks, or jeeps, or boots, or Spam, or beer. And thus, adjunct American lagers swept the land, overtaking many a small brewery.

**F**ronically, Anchor Brewing was saved by money made from one of these industrialized products. The Maytag Corporation prospered selling washing machines — providing quite a few of those mass-produced things that everybody wanted. And so it came to be in 1965 that a young Fritz Maytag, great-grandson of company founder Frederick Maytag, was sitting at the Old Spaghetti Factory in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, enjoying an Anchor steam beer when he was told that it would be the last one he would ever have. The brewery was closing.

Fritz headed down to the brewery and ended up using some of his inheritance to purchase a controlling share in the failing brewery. The young Stanford graduate then went about learning everything he could about brewing beer. He took an

interest in reviving the older styles of steam beer.

"The only hope we had to get traction was to be more traditional," says Maytag today, sitting in Anchor's Potrero Hill brewery, "To be more real, more old-fashioned."

And by being more old-fashioned, Anchor spearheaded the revival of craft brewing in America. Sadly, between sugary sweet soda and the cost-reducing production tactics of corporate America, the USA had come to expect mass-produced lager beers. There was a whole other world of beer that was being sorely neglected. Anchor's beers helped reawaken American taste buds.

"Normal people now want beer like that," says Maytag of their hoppy, flavorful brews. "In those days that was just unheard of. Why would you drink a beer like that? What's wrong with it? It looks like it's dark."

"We were not doing anything goofy," says Maytag. "We were trying to go back to the most solid, old-fashioned, traditional beers imaginable. And nowadays to make a stir you have to do something... you

## The Truth About Lagers And Ales

The difference between a lager and an ale comes down to just one thing: yeast. Ale yeast, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* if you're feeling fancy, is called top fermenting yeast as it does all of its work at the top of the fermentation tank. It performs best at a balmy 75°F, meaning that as the wort cools, an ale starts fermenting sooner. The sooner fermentation starts, the

less of a chance icky bacteria have at setting up shop in your beer.

Lager yeast, *Saccharomyces carlsbergensis*, works at fermentation at the bottom of the tank, and needs much cooler temperatures in order to operate. If a brewery doesn't have the means to cool the wort quickly before lager yeast can work its magic, that's where problems start.



have a chocolate-strawberry stout. In those days there was not a porter in all of England when we launched Anchor Porter and it was the only real dark beer in America... We didn't use coloring, it was made with dark and black malt."

But they didn't stop there. Dan Mitchell, who's worked at Anchor Brewing for over twenty-five years, says Fritz Maytag would walk up to him on the production floor and simply say, "You know, nobody makes the original American whiskey." And then just walk away.

**A**mérica's original whiskey was rye whiskey. Heck, the original recipe for a Manhattan calls for rye, but prohibition was the death of rye. Americans had become accustomed to the smooth flavor of blended whiskeys from Canada and Ireland, smuggled across the borders. Or they grew to favor the toasty backwoods, bootleg bourbons of Kentucky.

And in the same way that Anchor helped resurrect steam beer and craft brewing, they were among the first to begin distilling rye. Made from a single copper pot still, Anchor's Old Potrero Rye (Straight and Colonial styles), and Old Potrero Hotaling's Whisky (named for the whisky warehouse that survived the 1906 earthquake and fire), are made in limited batches and are hard to find, even in San Francisco.

But that may be changing. Last year, Fritz Maytag sold the brewery to the Griffin Group of Novato, known for their work in the spirits world, most notably with Skyy Vodka (later selling their share to Gruppo Campari). Liquor marketers Berry Brothers and Rudd of London are also partial owners. Through these transactions, Anchor has gone from a small maker of craft beer and whiskey to a company with an importing arm boasting over fifty brands from around the globe.



"Fritz had come to the point where he was ready to move on," says Keith Greggor of Griffin Group, late one afternoon in the brewery's taproom. "And we thought, what a great synergy to put the two businesses together. That would enable us to strengthen the spirits that are made here — Junipero Gin and Old Potrero Whisky — which were not really getting their fair shake out in the industry because this is a beer focused company. But we could use our spirit distribution network to help those."

After the sale, a murmur arose from beer aficionados around the world, wondering: "Will Anchor now start cutting corporate corners? Will it become another mass-produced American beer?"

"One of the things with Fritz was, you know, you had to pass a test," says Greggor. "You had to be approved. And it took a while to get to know Fritz and to really convince him that the

very values that he had put together in this company were something that we believed in."

And one of the first new releases that came from Anchor Brewers and Distillers confirmed this. Much like Maytag had revived a late nineteenth century beer recipe and a whiskey recipe from the late eighteenth, Berry Bros and Rudd's No.3 London Dry Gin chose to emulate what gin may have been like at the end of the seventeenth century. "I wanted to create the gin we would have made 250 years ago," said David King, creator of the gin, between sips of his preferred cocktail, the classic Negroni.

During San Francisco Beer Week last year, Anchor released Brekle's Brown, a brown ale named in homage to the brewery's original founder, George Brekle. And so things come full circle, and Anchor's tradition of honoring those that came before continues full steam ahead.