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CHOW

Something to chew on

Rethinking corn and rice as beer ingredients



Dogfish Head's Chicha ale made with chewed-up Peruvian corn.
PHOTO COURTESY OF DOGFISH HEAD

Corn and rice: These staple grains have supported humans for ages. In the 20th century, they became key ingredients of mainstream American lagers. These grains, it turns out, help provide the sugar necessary for making alcohol but without adding much, if any, extra bodyweight to the beer. The result is often beers light in color and body and, and by some opinions, bland tasting.

As craft beer emerged in the 1970s and '80s, the people making a new type of small-scale beer scorned mainstream brands and the methods used to make them. In the process, rice and corn got thrown under the bus as inferior to more flavorful barley. Craft beer enthusiasts took to labeling rice and corn "adjuncts," and they said these ingredients were merely additives to help brewers cut corners in the brewing process, saving money while watering down the beer.

How times have changed. Today, some craft brewers are giving these grains a second chance as corn and rice find their way into craft brewery beer kettles around the country. Lagunitas, Almanac, the Bruery, Ballast Point,

Midnight Sun, Dogfish Head and many more have made beers containing rice.

Rice, it turns out, adds subtle flavors to the beer—light and fragrant grain notes, compared to the heavier flavors of barley.

Corn is seeing its own revival as a craft beer ingredient, after many years as enemy No. 1 for critics of industrial-scale agriculture and food production. Cicerone and writer Miles Liebtag put it succinctly in a December 2017 essay in which he wrote, "[M]ore and more breweries are experimenting with the use of corn to make approximations of styles and brands they otherwise mock and deride."

In fact, the recent rise of craft lagers—a beer category historically dominated by the companies that make Coors, Miller, Bud and the like—has coaxed many craft brewers to give rice and corn a chance.

Trevor Martens, co-owner and head brewer at Pond Farm Brewing Co., in San Rafael, says there is nothing inherently wrong with lagers produced largely with rice and corn at industrial scales. Even the fact that these types of beers have relatively little flavor is not necessarily a great flaw.

"By brewing a rice lager, craft brewers are giving consumers

a light beer option that's still produced on small scale by an independent brewer," Martens writes in an email.

Indian Valley Brewing Co. in Novato has added corn to the recipe of its lager 50 Trips to Pini. Fifteen years ago, this might have been a shameful affront to craft brewing ethics. Today, it's quite the opposite—just one more way to make a diversity of beer styles.

Among the more charismatic corn-based beers is Dogfish Head's Chicha, a beer inspired by an Andean tradition of chewing kernels of corn before brewing, thereby facilitating the fermentation process with human salivary enzymes. Dogfish Head's rendition, first made in 2009, has involved company parties at which employees stood side by side chewing purple Peruvian corn and spitting it into the brew pot.

The fact is corn and rice are charismatic grains in their own right. They have rich cultural histories and form the foundation of entire regional cuisines. They also, not surprisingly, can add flavor and nuance to beers. In a venue where creativity and innovation are valued virtues, excluding rice and corn on arbitrary grounds goes, well, against the grain. □