



MUST-TRY  
**CRAFT**  
**BEERS**  
OF OHIO

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# INTRODUCTION

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There's never been a better time to be a craft beer drinker in Ohio. Ever. Just head out to any reputable bar or restaurant and check out the beer menu. Or wander down the beer aisle at the grocery store and marvel at the selection. Or stop by the local growler shop that specializes in fresh draft beer. Or better yet, visit your local brewery or breweries and sample at their tasting rooms.

Ohio is overflowing with craft beer diversity today—both from out-of-state breweries distributing here and from the growing number of Ohio breweries opening. Amazingly, 22 of the 25 largest craft breweries in the United States now sell their beer in Ohio, the seventh-most-populous state in the nation. And Ohio, which at the turn of the century had only about 20 craft brewers, boasted *more than 200 in 2017*.

We are a state of beer lovers. We consume about 30.1 gallons per capita each year, or an astounding 321 beers per person. All that drinking contributes mightily to the state economy.

The Beer Institute and National Beer Wholesalers Association estimated in 2017 that the beer industry, including Anheuser-Busch InBev and MillerCoors—both with breweries in Ohio—had a \$13 billion impact on the state economy. That's billion with a “b.” There are more than 40,000 people employed in the state thanks to the beer industry, according to their *Beer Serves America* report.

Meanwhile, the Brewers Association, the trade group for craft brewers, based in Boulder, Colorado, reported in 2013 that the craft beer industry provided a \$1.2 billion bump to the Ohio economy. Those numbers are growing, thanks to breweries opening in record numbers.

The Ohio breweries range from tiny operations that swap out their beers as fast as they are consumed to two of the largest craft brewers in the United States: Boston Beer, which operates a Samuel Adams brewery in Cincinnati, and Great Lakes Brewing in Cleveland.

The craft beer revolution started in Ohio in 1988 when Great Lakes opened a seven-barrel brewpub in Cleveland's Ohio City neighborhood. Ohio's craft beer industry has had its ups and downs since. There was the boom in the 1990s when everyone decided to open a brewpub. They popped up everywhere. Then many places fizzled and went out of business. The problem, in some cases, came from restaurateurs who opened breweries without knowing how to run a successful brewery and in others, from brewers who opened restaurants without knowing how to run a successful restaurant. Perhaps some of the failures could be blamed on beer drinkers themselves for not being fully ready to embrace craft beer.

Ohio started to see another swell in the late 2000s, with much, but not all, of that growth centered in northeast Ohio around Cleveland. Hoppin' Frog Brewery in Akron, Cornerstone Brewing in Berea, Jackie O's Brewery in Athens, Mt. Carmel Brewing in Mt. Carmel, Rivertown Brewing in Lockland, Weasel Boy Brewing in Zanesville, and others all got their start during the decade.

The floodgates opened in the early 2010s. By the beginning of 2012, there were 49 breweries in the state, including Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors. At that point, there wasn't a single brewery in Dayton or its suburbs. A mere five years later, there were more than 200 statewide—with 15 in the Dayton area. Cincinnati and Columbus also experienced big gains.

But it's not just major Ohio cities enjoying this latest craft beer buzz. Midsized communities such as Newark, Mansfield, Portsmouth, Athens, and Findlay have their own breweries. You can even find them in small towns like Millersburg (pop. 3,070), Heath (pop. 10,389), Lisbon (pop. 2,783), and Port Clinton (pop. 6,047).

It wasn't always like this. *Wait; scratch that.* It actually was like this before Prohibition. Back then every town had a brewery or two. But the rise of Anheuser-Busch and Miller, thanks in part to ingenious national advertising, blew away all those regional breweries in Ohio. They're back now, in the form of craft operations.

There are plenty of reasons behind the recent explosion. For starters, people are drinking more craft beer, and bars, restaurants, and grocery stores are taking notice and offering more brands. The movement to shop local and eat local didn't hurt, either.

Ohio also became much more beer friendly. State legislators amended outdated laws, making it easier for craft brewers to open and flourish here.

One of the biggest changes was, at least in the eyes of brewers, a no-brainer. Before 2012, brewers weren't allowed to serve their beer at their businesses. *Wait; scratch that, too.* Serving beer was allowed, but only if the brewers bought a second state license for \$3,906. And that license had to be renewed every year.

In other words, if a brewery wanted to open a tasting room, it had to pay \$3,906 a year for a brewing license and another \$3,906 to serve its beer. Without that second license, a brewery could offer a tour but could not give samples at the tour's end. That kept many breweries closed and off limits to their fans. The funny thing was that wineries had no such restriction. They could make their wine and sell it on the premises without purchasing a separate, costly license.

In 2012, the law changed, and brewers started opening tasting rooms left and right. The change allowed brewers to give people the chance to literally drink in the experience of being at a brewery.

"To those who have come for our tours, our saving grace has always been the depth of the explanation of our brewing," former Mt. Carmel assistant brewer Patrick Clark told me at the time the law took effect. "But let's be honest—tasting is the most important part of the process."

Not only did the change create a new marketing tool for the brands, it also provided an influx of cash. Beer drinkers were now coming to the breweries and slapping down money to taste the freshest beer available instead of buying it at a bar, restaurant, or store. They were getting it at the source.

This allowed some new brewers, especially those interested in opening nanobreweries, to get into the craft brewing industry while keeping their day jobs. They could brew during the week and open their breweries on the weekends as they got their businesses off the ground. The money generated by sales at their tasting rooms kept the breweries afloat.

Then in 2013, the state made things even easier. It created a new brewing license for craft brewers. Instead of buying a \$3,906 A1 license, any brewer that produced less than 30 million gallons a year—only Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors exceed that amount here—could buy an A1C license for \$1,000. Just like that, it was \$2,906 less expensive to open a brewery in Ohio.

But I'm getting off track. This book isn't intended to be a history lesson. It's about showcasing award-winning, tasty, and unusual Ohio-made beers. Let's get this out of the way upfront. The beers showcased here are not necessarily the best in the Buckeye State. The best beer is whatever you think it is.



If that's Thirsty Dog Raspberry Ale, so be it. If it's Triple Digit Chickow!, so be it. If it's Columbus Bodhi, so be it. Even if it's Bud Light, so be it. You get the picture?

There is no way to compile an objective list of the "best" beers when everyone's best will vary. That's why this book is entitled *50 Must-Try Craft Beers of Ohio*. The 50 likely include some of your favorites. Then again, maybe they don't. But I hope this list will spark debate and, perhaps, give you a reason to sample something you have never tried before.

With hundreds upon hundreds of Ohio-made beers to choose from, it wasn't easy determining which brews should make the cut.

Sure, picking some was easy. A few have won numerous awards at major beer competitions and earned a spot on pedigree alone. As of this writing, Fat Head's Head Hunter IPA has taken home four medals at the Great American Beer Festival and the World Beer Cup. It has also won gold at the West Coast IPA Festival—the first East Coast beer to do so. That's not bad for a brewery that opened in 2009. Head Hunter is considered one of the best IPAs in the country. How could it not be represented here?

Then there's Great Lakes Christmas Ale. In northeast Ohio, it has an over-the-top, cult-like following. You know those people who do nothing but talk about their favorite television shows. Christmas Ale is like that for them. It is the best holiday beer ever, hands-down. No debate allowed. The brewery releases the beer on draft with plenty of fanfare, even including a Santa Claus. The first day it goes on sale at the brewery gift shop, you can watch fan after fan leave with cases in hand.

Meanwhile, there's Elevator Ghost Scorpion Lager. It has won no awards. But the first batch—made for the Fiery Foods Festival in Columbus—was so insanely hot, people vomited after drinking it. Yes, that's right. People who like insanely hot foods threw up. How could any beer adventurer not want to sample it? I did. And I immediately started drinking milk because it burned all the way down my throat into my stomach.

So let's see. An award-winning beer, a popular beer, and an unusual beer—there are at least three reasons why a beer could make this list of 50 must-try brews.

To qualify, a beer has to be available either year-round or on a seasonal basis. In other words, you, the reader, have to be able to buy it. One-offs, those brews made only for special occasions or events, weren't considered.

When I first started discussing this idea, I thought it would be difficult to come up with 50 beers. Boy, was I wrong. As a newspaper reporter who has covered the beer industry for more than a decade and a beer blogger who has traveled the state tasting all that Ohio has to offer, I compiled an initial list

of 76 beers. But that was my working list *before* I visited the new breweries that have opened in recent years, *before* I reached out to brewers and others I respect to get their opinions, and *before* I realized that there were way too many India pale ales and stouts on my list.

Self-doubt crept into my head early. How could I possibly pare the Ohio craft beer industry to just 50? How could I leave out this beer or that beer? What did I get myself into? Then, I would sit at a brewery, sampler in hand. I would recall how exhilarating it is to talk with brewers about the beer itself, to see their absolute passion for what I was sipping. For me, beer is about more than just the liquid. It's also about the personalities and stories behind each brand. That's what I want to share with you in this book.

I've also included other beers to try if you enjoy the one showcased.

Now, if I had limited this book to 50 beers, it would be pretty short. And, as I've mentioned, beer is about more than the liquid for me.

So I've included four other chapters. I recommend 10 cool breweries to visit and have a beer. There's a chapter telling the stories behind the 10 coolest brewery names. There are profiles of 10 influential people in the Ohio craft beer industry. And I describe 10 quintessential Ohio foods and recommend a beer to drink with each one.

One last word of warning—I started researching this book in 2014. There has been an explosion in not only the number of breweries that have opened in Ohio but also the number of beers produced.

It hasn't been easy trying to keep track of everything new. The task, as my editor Ricky Huard kept reminding me, was a "moving target." It indeed was. One beer originally to be featured in the book was scrapped at the last minute because the brewery closed. In another case, a brewery changed its name. Then, there were all the breweries that decided to redesign their beer labels after I had taken photos. And, as happens all too frequently in the craft beer industry, brewers came and went while I was writing and rewriting.

Trying to keep on top of it all was both a fun and frustrating process.

Cheers!