

Up and Coming:

MIKE HESS BREWING

BY MICHAEL KUDERKA

If one town in America could exude the persona of craft beer, it would have to be San Diego, California. No offense to Boulder, Colorado or Seattle, Washington but San Diego, it seems, has become the incubator of craft breweries and craft beer innovation.



Mike Hess Brewing brewery and tasting room. Photo by Christopher Verdick (verdictkmoja.com)

With over 101 breweries established, and 45 more being planned, one could only imagine the level of brewing talent and drive required to be successful in this very crowded market. Fortunately, unbelievable drive and talent is exactly what Mike Hess has, having gone from home brewer to “nanobrewer” to a 30 bbl brewhouse in just three short years.

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As a retailer we are looking for unique brands. Sometimes it is the packaging, sometimes it is the flavors profile, and sometimes it is the quality of the brand or the reputation of the brewer.

It would seem that the Mike Hess brands have it all. From Habitus, a full flavored Double IPA (winner of the Gold Award at the 2014 World Beer Cup), to Claritas, a well-balanced Kölsch, to Solis which keeps you engaged with a different dynamic recipe San Diego style IPA, consumers are excited about these brands.

BT: So how do you go from home brewer to brewing 360 barrels a year?

MH: We were early adopters of the idea of the nano – in fact San Diego’s first. The transition took a lot of MacGyvering, meaning a lot of hard thinking, planning and creativity to come up the best, cleanest way we could make it work. At the time there were no resources, or anything even close to “Pronanobrewer.com”.

However, despite all the early chal-

lenges, the more recent transition from 360 barrels to the 3,800 barrels we did in 2014, and this year’s projected jump to 9,000 barrels, has been much harder than the initial step up to nanobrewing – in retrospect, the transition from homebrewer almost looks easy!

But the hardwork has paid off. We now have a world class tasting room, with a guest skybridge coming through our 30 barrel brewhouse and cellar, and Mike Hess Brewing is a very popular beer destination in a very competitive market. It has been an awesome transition.

BT: The branding is very fresh and unique, what has inspired it?

MH: We wanted a nod to tradition and the old world history of brewing and something that was clean-lined and fresh. We use a lot of white space and try not to fill up space with 'stuff'. The critters we use are inspired from great ancient works in many cases.

The Latin names are another throwback to classics and tradition for our core beers. We didn’t want to be another brewery just using catchy names, but rather have an upscale brand that reflected the quality of the beers we make.

BT: You have a broad style range which seems to contribute to the brewery’s appeal. How do you choose what to brew?

MH: Like a lot of breweries, we brew what we like to drink. Some of the styles we brew, e.g. Claritas Kölsch came over from my homebrew days and was brewed due to a personal connection with friends from

Koln and wanting to brew a beer that reminds them of home. But we’ve brewed a lot of styles by design from day one to appeal to a broad range of consumers, which gives us the ability to convert many of them to craft.

BT: How did Ficus come about? Can you describe the brand and the flavor profile/experience?

MH: Ficus is lovely, dark, sweet Belgian ale, with a deceptively large 8% ABV. It uses locally grown, organic Brown Turtle figs. These hand-crushed figs are added to our hopback and we run the hot wort through them on the way to the fermenters. We actually pick up a full °P from this, as well as the essence of the figs. We use a blend of traditional French Saison yeast, as well as some California ale yeast, to temper the Belgian overtones.

BT: What is next? Are there states you are considering for expansion?

MH: We are currently distributed throughout Southern California and the greater Phoenix area; with designs to bring the brand to the Bay Area (Northern California). We’d like to get out to Denver and the rest of Colorado and go from there. We’ll see how much we can handle with this brew house.

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