

S2 Ep2: red, white and brew

[Intro music]

Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn.

TC: It's a Tuesday afternoon, recording a podcast. It's time for a beer.

[Beer opening sound and Tony takes a sip]

TC: What's the first thing that goes through your mind when you crack open a cold one. Me? Right now? I'm thinking that this is pretty good. It tastes like... I don't know, hops? I don't know, for me a good beer just signals the start of a great weekend. I'm a foodie so I associate beer with social outings — sitting by the pool, cookouts, baseball games, whatever.

But I realize there are a lot of people who are way into their beer... especially those people brewing their own beer at home. There's a common stereotype of the flannel-wearing, tattooed and bearded hipsters being America's craft brew snobs. And it's kinda true. Brewing today is kind of a white man's game. And white men are overwhelmingly represented in the homebrewing scene. In fact, a 2013 Homebrewers Association survey estimated that 92 percent of homebrewers are white. And well over 90 percent are men.

But... it hasn't always been that way.

[Pouring sounds]

Mike Stein and Peter Jones: It looks like cider or like an apple juice or something. Yup it's unfiltered. You know, unpasteurised, so beer in its purest form. Yeah, the color's closer to cider.

TC: A few weeks ago, I visited Mike Stein and Peter Jones. They're business partners who have got a brewing company called Lost Lagers where they recreate old beer recipes. And they're teaching homebrewers to do the same. And, along the way, they get to know some of America's earliest brewers. They even served me a beer that George Washington once enjoyed. It kinda looked like apple juice, but with the thickness of a Guinness.

But they also noticed that American beer history, as it's usually told, tends to exclude a *lot* of people -- especially women and people of color.

MS and PJ: As an academic historian, it's, I have to tell you really hard to get people to really care about history. And so beer is one great way that I can take what's written on the page, and try and turn that into a story. And if I can a recipe that's written on the page, and create something tangible that people can drink and then, imagine what the past was like, tell stories through that beer, then I think that's even more powerful than traditional history.

TC: So today, on Sidedoor, I'm gonna do more than just sip this summer shandy.

I'm gonna drink in a much longer history -- one that's been ... um, *brewing*... in America for centuries. Keep in mind that the brewing history you're about to hear isn't definitive. But we're hoping you'll meet some early American beer pioneers whose stories you've never heard — I hadn't.

MS and PJ: That's one thing I really love doing when I'm recreating these beers, is, is providing a venue to tell stories about the past and and what the past can tell us today.

TC: And we're also going to meet two brewers today, who are pushing beer creativity forward and helping to inspire a new wave of diversity in brewing. All that, after this quick break.

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<<Pre-Roll Break>>  
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Theresa McCulla: Martha Ballard was a midwife and a healer.

TC: That's Theresa McCulla, the Smithsonian's first-ever brewing historian. Yeah. That's a real job. And... it's super cool.

TM: She was born in Massachusetts in 1735 but she became well-loved much later by historians because she started to keep a diary, but not until she was in her 50s and at that point she lived in inland Maine.

TC: So, basically we're talking some time in the 1780s. America had just won the Revolutionary War. And Martha Ballard... she starts keeping her diary.

But if it were a beach read, Ballard's diary wouldn't exactly be considered by the public to be a page-turner.

To give you an idea of the contents of the diary, here's my colleague Alison Leitner as Martha Ballard herself.

Alison Leitner: Alright, I'm gonna channel how I feel when I have to vacuum or something. Okay.

June, 1786. We brewed a barrel and a half of beer. I planted two ears of corn. December, 1796. Clear weather. I've been at home, washed the West Room and kitchen floors and did other work about the house. Brewed. July 1798. Gloomy weather. I've had a lonely day. Some heavy showers this afternoon. I have done a large wash and am fatigued. I brewed also.

TC: For historians, diaries can be a treasure trove of information to learn how people really lived.

TM: What is remarkable about many of these tasks is how very unremarkable brewing beer was. So as you see, beer was kind of the daily routine of her life.

TC: It was just another household task.

And that's something that's not even unique to Early America. It turns out that basically for all of time -- as early as 7,000 B.C., it was women were in charge of making fermented beverages.

TM: You can look at the early history of the North American continent where indigenous peoples brewed fermented beverages from a variety of plants such as corn, fruits, other items like that or you know even much much further back in history, if you look to Egypt or central Europe. Often brewing was paired with baking bread. It was always a task done in the home.

TC: So in the American North, during the country's early days, women did most of the brewing. And in the South... it was a similar-ish story. Wealthy white men had the luxury to not brew their own beer. Because on large plantations, enslaved people did the domestic dirty work.

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TC: There are some things we know about the culinary contributions of enslaved Americans, but when it comes to really specific details -- like whether or not they brewed... what their recipes were... or even if they were allowed to brew their own personal batches -- historians run into a bit of an information wall. And a lot like the lives of women in the early 1700s... there aren't many documents that detail what their everyday lives looked like.

But at least in a couple early American cases, we do have evidence of plantation brewmasters. Picture this: the year is 1802. Thomas Jefferson who's currently the president of the United States comes back to his country home in central Virginia, called Monticello. And... the third president wants... okay, no, he DEMANDS a beer.

Lee Graves: Actually, among all the founding fathers, he was the beer geek.

TC: This is author and retired journalist Lee Graves. He lives not far from the plantation.

LG: He was quite picky about the beer itself.

TC: Jefferson loved beer so much... but he didn't actually do much of the brewing himself. It's really a bit of a knock on his "beer geek" credentials.

LG: It was the slaves in the South in particular, who actually carried out the hands-on brewing.

TC: At Monticello, it was left up to a man named Peter Hemings. If you know your history, you might have figured out he's the brother of Sally Hemings... and Sally is remembered by history as the enslaved woman who gave birth to six of Jefferson's children.

LG: We don't really have a good physical description of him, the Hemings are generally described as light-skinned. We know that Peter Hemings was super smart. Jefferson described him as being of exceptional intelligence and diligence. Through the course of his life, he was a tailor. He was trained in French cuisine. His brother James actually went to France with Thomas Jefferson to specifically to learn French cooking. And in order to get his freedom, James taught Peter Hemings all he knew -- well, most of what he knew, about French cooking.

TC: Peter Hemings was the principal cook at Monticello from 1796 to 1809. And it seems that his culinary talents weren't limited to just food.

TC: According to the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, America's third president wrote to [James Madison](#), quote: "our malter and brewer is uncommonly intelligent and capable of giving instruction." He suggested that Madison send a student to Monticello for Peter Hemings to mentor.

So this adds to the story of beer that it's a product that was produced at home, by the people who ran the home... basically since the beginning of time.

But then beer turned into a business... and that's when beer got disrupted.

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TC: From the beginning of European colonization of North America... women brewed... enslaved people brewed. And men with money... they didn't really do so much brewing. But all that starts to change around the Civil War. And now we're now in the mid-1850s, and beer is about to enter its early "Get the Money" phase.

Let's go back to the Smithsonian's beer historian Theresa McCulla.

TM: It continues to be something that is firmly a domestic task until really the late 18th century, early 19th century as increasing number of German immigrants come to arrive in America.

TC: And the German immigrants brought with them a very specific taste in beer.

TM: They bring a different style of beer, a lighter lager style brewed with a different kind of yeast and the popularity of beer among German immigrants and eventually their access to increased amounts of capital allowed them to found professional breweries.

TC: These German immigrants began to create their own breweries. Most of these breweries stayed small family businesses. But this was a very different type of operation than the kitchen-breweries of the 1700s. These guys were pros.

More professional breweries meant more money. And this contributes to a global trend that started in the 1700s when truly for the first time in history -- as the beer industry exploded, men replaced women as the primary brewers.

TM: 19th century is when you have these the most prominent recognizable names that you know really became enduring brands. You have old breweries like Yuengling that developed in Pennsylvania eventually -- Coors in Colorado..

TC: Breweries popped up all over the country. And some were pretty successful. And... they kept growing. That is: until Prohibition happened in 1920... It wiped out most of the small, family owned breweries.

In the story of beer, Prohibition is a bit like the meteor that hit the dinosaurs. It came out of the clear blue sky... and then bam. It totally altered the industry, and only the luckiest -- and richest -- breweries survived.

TM: Many tried to switch modes of production and produce things like soft drinks or ice cream. Especially larger breweries tried to redirect their production and make use of sophisticated factories, refrigerated trucks tried to think of ways that they could make use of their infrastructure to survive Prohibition.

TC: Baltimore's JF Weissner & Sons Brewing Company, [New Orleans'](#) Columbia Brewing and [Chicago's](#) Mutual Brewing Company are all examples of the many local breweries that closed shop during Prohibition.

The biggest beer companies like Budweiser, Miller, Coors, with their huge supply chains, massive distribution networks, and big advertising budgets managed to weather Prohibition and go on to dominate in the 20th Century, after Prohibition was repealed.

[Beer jingles]

And during this time, homebrewing became sort of a lost art.

TC: Homebrewing was illegal following Prohibition for decades. It was not actually permitted federally until 1978. And so there's a kind of funny blip in the history of, of brewing that left it out of the immediate aftermath of the story of Prohibition even.

TC: Without a robust home brewing culture, and a very limited number of local breweries, people who were interested in beer didn't have that gateway into professional craft brewing that we have today.

Until a certain Georgia peanut farmer turned president changed the homebrew landscape dramatically.

Tony on tape: *And that's Jimmy Carter right?*

TM: Jimmy Carter signed the House resolution in 1978 which made homebrewing legal again. It went into effect in 1979, yes.

Tony on tape: *Why did they not want this homebrewing to be happening?*

TM: Some historians have the opinion that it was simply an oversight. It's a bit unclear. But certainly many Americans continue to homebrew especially in the late 1960's, early 1970's, it became quite popular again. And so previous to that time you know, you have the history of larger breweries offering a somewhat homogenous line of lager style beers. But once you get into it, a kind of second wave of homebrewing becoming newly popular again that's when efforts restarted to legalize it.

TC: In the years before homebrewing was legalized, Americans were noticing that their light, mass-produced lagers tasted pretty similar in that there were way fewer breweries than before. Okay, to put this in perspective, when Prohibition ended in 1933, there were 750 American beer companies. By 1978, there were just 44, and heavier, more flavorful ales as opposed to lighter tasting lagers were a rare find in US breweries. A trend piece in the New York Times from 1978 complains, "It's difficult to find an ale brewed in America today." So American homebrewers took measures into their own hands to add variety, flavor, and creativity back into their beer. And this is reflected in the craft beer scene. In 1980, there were just 8 microbreweries in the United States. As of 2016, there are over 3,000. The change in the beer industry since the legalizations of home brewing is almost unbelievable. And you can see it with your own eyes, on shelves of stores where craft brews are crowding in alongside big brands.

Next, we'll meet two African American women brewers who are part of America's current resurgence of small, creative brewers that are expanding beer's diversity. We'll be right back.

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<<Midroll Break>>  
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TC: Okay, let's review. During the country's infancy, most households in the Northern states got their beer from the woman of the house. She'd come up with recipes and would do the work of brewing. In the South, at least at Monticello, we have evidence that enslaved people also assumed some of the responsibility for plantations' beer supply.

But monetizing brewing in America meant pushing women and people of color out of the spotlight and away from the brew pot.

But today, the beer industry is returning to its roots.

Celeste Beatty: Definitely I would say gender was a big factor. The fact that I was a woman. People didn't take me seriously. I definitely would say race because so many doors are closed in my face for no apparent reason.

TC: That's Celeste Beatty, founder of Harlem Brewing Company. In 2000, Celeste started homebrewing for fun before deciding to turn her hobby into a commercial venture. In 2016, she landed a distribution deal with Walmart. But starting out, she got some disconcerting advice.

CB: I was continually being told by people, you got to have a white face, you got to have a white front. You're not gonna get into these doors unless you have a white person fronting for you. And I just refused to do that because I just have real issues accepting the fact that you know what about the quality of the beer? What about you know, the product that I'm creating?

TC: Beatty says that, when she was getting into brewing, it was even more male dominated than it is now.

CB: I didn't know any women at all, of any color, that were brewing. The only women that I knew were the women I met in Africa that were doing traditional brewing, and they weren't doing it commercially. And then over some many years I met a couple of the women that were brewing but they weren't in the immediate area. And then I did have a chance to meet a number of professional male brewers, pretty much all white males. But one particular brewer that I had the chance to meet was Garrett Oliver – he is the lead brewer for Brooklyn Brewing Company, who happens to be of African, African-American background.

TC: Despite early setbacks among distributors who were reluctant to take a chance on Harlem Brewing Company's product, Celeste has experienced a great deal of success as a brewer. But perhaps the moment she's most proud is when her beer was featured at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016.

CB: I don't really have words for it, but to finally have a place that's dedicated to talking about our history and our contributions here, abroad, our influence. I just think it's incredibly important. That this information is available so that they will know where our cultural experience, how it evolved. So to have the opportunity to have my beer, our beer there, I was just totally floored.

TC: Breaking into the craft beer industry is tough. It's taken Celeste 17 years to reach her current level of success. Ironically, the two defining characteristics that may have made her a brewer in America's earliest history -- her gender and her race -- have presented some key challenges for her business pursuits in the 21st century.

What about minority brewers who aren't starting distribution businesses? The hobbyists. Do they feel any more welcome?

Annie Johnson: My name is Annie Johnson.

TC: Annie Johnson is a beer pioneer and a really big deal.

[Tape of brewing competition: Next up we have the Homebrewer of the Year award. And the winner is, Annie Johnson of Sacramento, California. A light American lager.]

TC: Annie was named the American Homebrewers Association's [Homebrewer of the Year](#) in 2013, becoming just the second woman and first African American woman ever awarded that coveted distinction. But... appropriately... she says that her interest in beer has roots in Germany, where she grew up.

AJ: My mother's influence, you know, I'd always been fascinated with her stein collection. She had taught in Germany a lot of her young life. And then when we got to the States -- we had lived in Germany. I couldn't not stare at the stein's and I loved them. And she had stories about each one. So I learned about them and then I learned about beer styles. She taught me about wine as well and and when I got a little bit older, I thought boy, I think I'd like to do brewing. So she said you just go for it.

TC: And Annie went for it in a big way. She was based in Sacramento, California when she started brewing in 1998.

AJ: There is a great homebrewing community and it was through learning with, mostly guys that you know, you know you'd go for the ribbons, you go for the blue and we'd try to outdo each other so there was a few that I knew from the Bay Area and and a few from Sacramento County and it was a friendly competition. And then for me, I got addicted to the ribbons.

TC: Annie says that most of her peers and competitors, especially in the early days, have been white and male. But even if that can be a little bit isolating socially, it doesn't have any bearing on competitions.

AJ: You find out after a competition who's entered because everything is blind. That's the beauty of having your beer judged, it's a blind judging. So there's no bias to your beer. So yeah, I find that when I read who won competitions I see very few women. I'm seeing more but it kind of goes in waves. It's just nice, it's a wonderful thing that women, who were the original brewers of beer, are now coming back into the fold and welcomed into it because it's definitely an industry that benefits from the female perspective.

TC: And Annie says despite the fact that yes, beer is overwhelmingly male. And white. The American Homebrewers Association, or the AHA is actually trying to engage women.

AJ: It's a mostly male dominated, although there are more -- I saw more, last year it was in Baltimore. I saw more females and more minorities than I have ever seen. And the AHA is really working on

inclusiveness and diversity. They've actually established a diversity committee to get more people into the hobby.

TC: The 2013 Homebrewer of the Year title changed her life in ways she couldn't have imagined.

AJ: I won with American light lager, which is as light as it can get, which you know if in the wine world to be like a Sauvignon Blanc. There's no flaws that can be hidden. So that was in itself a huge thing. And then too, and I didn't think about it. But when I won I didn't realize that there hadn't been a female for 35 years that had won. And there had been no African-American women and the third unicorn, I guess you could call it, is that I'm also a gay female. So that's the one thing I don't get asked but I don't care, because beer doesn't care what color you are and on what you do at home.

[Music]

TC: So this summer, whether you're drinking an India Pale Ale at a barbecue, a Belgian wheat ale at a happy hour, or a mass produced light American lager at a baseball game... think about the history of that drink, and the many quirks of history that shaped it, and at the same time... our country.

Speaking of which, time for a little more research.

[Cracks open beer]

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<<Credits>>

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TC: You've been listening Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian, with support from PRX.

Sidedoor is a pretty new podcast and we're hoping to stick around for a while. So, please, please do us a favor (especially if you enjoy the show) and leave a review with Apple Podcasts. That's like giving us the best high five of our lives. You can also give us a shout, or, tweet, I guess, on our Twitter account which is @Sidedoorpod. That's all one word, it's @Sidedoorpod.

Our theme music is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Special thanks to our coworker Alison Leitner for bringing Martha Ballard, our brewing housewife, to life.

We'll list the rest of the songs used in this story on our website.

Our production team is Justin O'Neill, Stacia Brown, Jason Orfanon, Gabe Kosowitz, Jess Sadeq, Casey McAdams, Barbara Rehm, John Barth, Genevieve Sponsler, Elisabeth Pilger and Carley Lamke. I'm your host, Tony Cohn.

Thanks for listening.

[Music out]