



# The father of fine beer

How a brewing trailblazer built a family craft beer empire in Sydney's heart.

BY TAHLIA WHITFIELD

**D**ubbed the godfather of Australian beer, Dr Charles 'Chuck' Hahn has spent more than five decades reshaping the way Australians think about beer.

From pioneering Hahn Premium Lager in the 1980s to steering the rise of James Squire, his fingerprints are on almost every chapter of modern craft brewing in this country.

This year, Hahn re-entered the craft beer scene, opening a brewery hand-in-hand with his son.

Together with his son Scott, daughter-in-law Amy and an extended team of brewers and believers, he has launched Chuck & Son's Brewing Co in Sydney's inner-west suburb of St Peters.

It is at once a return to his independent roots and a passage for the next generation, comprising a legacy cast in family hands, where tradition and craft converge.

For the FMCG sector, this is no minor launch. Hahn's track record shows how quickly his ideas can shift consumer behaviour, build categories and push major brewers to lift their game. What happens at Chuck & Son's may ripple far beyond St Peters.

## From Colorado to Camperdown

Hahn certainly offers an eclectic CV and a robust timeline of lessons.

"Over my 54 years of brewing, I have had unique experiences working with large corporate brewers down to small independently run and family operated breweries. With each win, failure and memorable moment with a team I have learnt something along the way," Hahn told *Inside FMCG*.

That journey began in the US. After completing a PhD in Chemical Engineering (1968-71), the New York-born Hahn joined Coors Brewery in Colorado.

There, he built a new R&D and quality-control team, guided by company chair Bill Coors' famously concise mission statement: "Brew good beer." Hahn

said, "That comment has stayed with me forever and always remains my personal objective and obsession."

By the early 1980s, Hahn was in Australia, first as general manager of brewing at Tooth and Co, where he consolidated two breweries into one streamlined operation, and then as a technical adviser to Lion Breweries in New Zealand.

These years sharpened his philosophy that brewing wasn't just about process and product but about people. "In order to lead change, you need to connect with people – investing the time to be on the floor in the brewery, warehouse and break-rooms and being open to conversations – not being bound to a desk," Hahn recalled.

Then came the bold leap. In 1988, he founded Hahn Brewery in Camperdown, Sydney, backed by a team of collaborators and financiers who believed in his vision for fresher, European-style beers brewed locally.

Hahn Premium launched into a market dominated by bland domestics and overpriced imports. "We had an unwavering belief that we had a great product that could fill a gap," he explained.

Though the 1991-93 recession led to the acquisition of Hahn Brewery by Lion, Hahn's influence only widened. As Lion's chief brewer, he oversaw operations across Australia, New Zealand and China.

In 1998, he was managing director-turned-brewmaster for Malt Shovel Brewery, the home of the James Squire brand. Over the next two decades, Hahn and his team transformed James Squire from a quirky boutique range into the most recognised craft beer brand in the country.

By the time he 'retired' in 2022, Hahn had built, retooled or inspired almost every notable brewery in Australia. His peers speak of him with reverence.

"I have known Chuck for 27 years – he is a colleague, an indisputable visionary and mentor to many, and most of all a dear friend," James Brindley, managing director of Lion Australia told *Beer and Brewer* magazine. ➤

### Brewing with family

Retirement did not stick.

“Retirement can be really short and somewhat redundant when you love what you do,” Hahn recalled.

During a tasting session with his son Scott, sampling both craft beer and whiskey, the idea of starting again emerged.

“I confessed to Scott that I wasn’t done with brewing and still had a number of brewing ideas and recipes that I could share. To complement this, Scott was passionate about building something special for his family – a legacy if you like – and we both agreed that this emerging itch to create a brewery together wasn’t going away.”

That spark became Chuck & Son’s Brewing Co. The name is literal but also symbolic. Hahn has four daughters as well as Scott, and his daughter-in-law Amy is general manager of the brewery. The “& Son’s” is less about lineage than it is about legacy, passing on the craft, not just the business.

*Hahn carries craft tradition to St Peters, Sydney.*





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The brewery opened its doors in May last year after a long search for the right site. The St Peters facility combines a production brewery with a tap room designed for the community.

“Our tap room gives further opportunities for people to enjoy the social interactions and memories that follow. We are all about making good beers for everyone to enjoy,” Hahn said.

### Obstacles and opportunities

Launching a new brewery in today's crowded craft market is no small feat. The golden years of easy growth are over, with rising costs, saturation and shifting consumer habits reshaping the landscape. Hahn is clear-eyed about the hurdles.

“There are still significant challenges out there in the craft-beer marketplace, and whilst we are not immune to them, we have so far had a really pleasing run since [launching in] late May 2024,” he said.

Among the biggest early obstacles were: finding the right site (which took 12 months), raising capital and managing fit-out approvals.

“Of course, we had to navigate common hurdles...Despite that, the overwhelming surprise and delight for us was that it was all worth it. We have developed a brand, brewery and tap room that I am incredibly proud of. And the best bit is seeing customers and the community enjoying the Chuck & Son's brand,” he said. ➤



For FMCG players watching closely, the lesson is that meticulous planning still matters. Hahn stressed the “enormous focus on planning, from brand strategy to interior design, from budgets to brewing equipment customisation, and from recipe development to finding a collaborative team.”

What keeps Hahn so passionate after half a century? His answer is disarmingly simple.

“A chemical engineer usually works in factories, but a brewer works with people in establishing his trade,” he said.

For him, beer has always been about sociability. Even at large breweries, consumer focus groups are vital, but in the craft world, that connection is immediate.

“As craft brewers, we have direct interactions with our customers as they enjoy our delicious products. I have always

enjoyed working with people and establishing qualified teams to develop interesting products. Beer enjoyment is what it is all about,” he said. “As a brewer, one gets to enjoy what one produces, and to enjoy the social interaction that results from making good beers.”

This human-centred philosophy runs through Chuck & Son’s. It is less a production plant than a community hub, a place where beer is a medium for connection.

### Legacy still fermenting

Asked how he wants Chuck & Son’s to be remembered, Hahn’s answer is aspirational but grounded.

“We have an ambition to be Australia’s most respected and adored craft-beer brand and hope to be a long standing positive contributor to the Australian beerscape,” he said. He imagines future customers

saying things like:

“This is my go-to craft beer brand that always has my back.”

“I can taste the experience, obsession and care put into every drop and love the story behind the brand.”

“When I share a Chuck & Son’s beer out and about or in their tap room, I feel like I am welcomed into the family.”

That word “family” evidently resonates. Chuck & Son’s has embraced its purpose as a multigenerational conversation about what beer means in Australian life.

Few individuals have had such an outsized impact on the category, from mainstream lagers to boutique ales.

Hahn has proven again and again that beer, handled with devotion and humanity, can reshape markets.

Chuck & Son’s Brewing Co may be the start of his most personal and influential act yet. ■