



# Mad

BY JESS LANDER

# Local

Nile Zacherle of Mad Fritz is starting his own hop movement, crafting hyper-local beers with a winemaker's perspective.

JEFF BRAMWELL PHOTOGRAPHY

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**Locally sourced. Sustainably farmed. Grass-fed. Organic.** We're willing to pay top dollar for quality when it comes to our wine and our food, so why don't we demand the same from our beer? Nile Zacherle, winemaker at David Arthur Vineyards and founder of and brewer at Mad Fritz Brewing in St. Helena, believes we should. Since launching Mad Fritz with his wife, Whitney Fisher, in 2014, Zacherle has put his own unique spin on the craft-beer movement, brewing "origin beer" through a wine-making lens.

"Origin beer is beer of a place. That has been our mantra," says Zacherle, who has been brewing beer since he was 18 years old and is about to celebrate his 23rd vintage as a winemaker. "Why do we make beer? What makes [our brewery] special? The answer is that all our beers have a story of origin."

Zacherle sources his water from all over Napa Valley, including his own place of employment, David Arthur Vineyards on Pritchard Hill; Fisher Vineyards in Calistoga; and Lewelling Vineyards in St. Helena. His hops come from a number of small farms, including three in Napa County and five in Sonoma County, and he has partnered with local growers to plant and grow Mad Fritz's barley in their fallow vineyards.

Because of this push to keep it local, each brew has a colorful Wine Country ancestry. His Napa ale, for instance, is part of the Terroir Series, which also includes Sonoma and Mendocino ales. The Napa County ingredients were all sourced within a 20-mile radius: The barley was grown in Oak Knoll at Trefethen Vineyards, the hops were cultivated at Wilms Ranch in Pope Valley, and the water was sourced from David Arthur.

Next, Zacherle would like to make an estate beer with all the water, hops, and barley from the same property. While this may be common practice in the wine world, it is nearly unheard of in regard to beer. Origin beer is such a unique concept that Zacherle is creating a Wikipedia page for it. The majority of breweries use ingredients purchased from large, one-stop-shop supply companies.

And there's good reason for this; this approach not only guarantees more consistency in the beer but also enables breweries to set up shop nearly anywhere—even in places where hops and barley don't grow. Plus, if a particular beer is a huge hit with consumers, the brewery can easily and replicate it.

But Zacherle isn't after consistency; he's looking for quality and uniqueness. "I always say, 'If you want consistent beer, don't come here.' We're not for everybody. If you're a mainstream IPA drinker, you may not be ready for what we do, and that's totally fine,"



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—Nile Zacherle



## Napa Brews on the Rise

Move over wine. There's a beer renaissance happening in Napa Valley, with several new microbreweries and taprooms popping up in the downtown Napa area.

And why not? If hundreds of wineries can flourish together in one valley using unique local ingredients, why can't breweries? "If everyone pulled from the same vineyards, the only thing that would differentiate the wines is the oak program, maybe the blending. I'd like to see more people using local ingredients," says Zacherle.

Here are a few highlights of Napa's booming beer scene.

### 1. STONE BREWING

The famed Stone Brewing from San Diego County—one of the 10 largest craft brewers in the United States—opened a Napa outpost this May in the historic, 141-year-old Borrero building on the edge of downtown, by the Napa River. Lead brewer Steve Gonzalez uses local ingredients and wine barrels, and partners with nearby wineries to craft specialty Napa brews. [stonebrewing.com](http://stonebrewing.com).

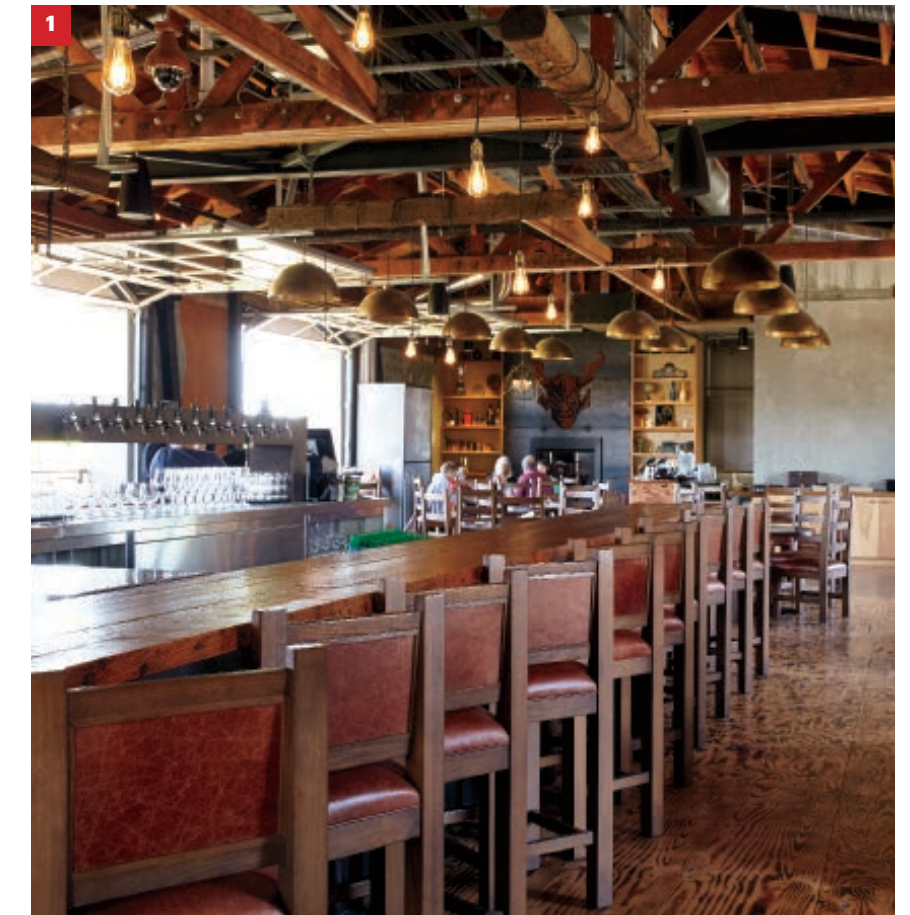
### 2. ST. CLAIR BROWN

Napa's original urban winery launched a nanobrewery last winter in its tiny greenhouse-turned-tasting room. St. Clair Brown cofounder, winemaker, and brewmaster Elaine St. Clair brings a winemaker's approach to her brewing process, crafting balanced, food-friendly beers that are unfiltered and naturally carbonated. [stclairbrownwinery.com](http://stclairbrownwinery.com).

### 3. NAPA BIKE AND BREWERY TOUR

Hop on a day tour of the buzzing Napa brew scene via this bike excursion from Getaway Adventures. Pedal around to three of four downtown Napa breweries for flights or pints (and lunch at an extra cost). \$129, [getawayadventures.com](http://getawayadventures.com).

**1:** Stone Brewing's Napa outpost in the historic Borrero building. **2:** St. Clair Brown has transformed its greenhouse into a nanobrewery. **3:** One of the stops on the Napa Bike and Brewery Tour is Fieldwork Brewing Co. at Oxbow Public Market.



**1:** Old Possum Brewing Co. bar manager Jordan Bothe assists beer lovers at the new Santa Rosa brewery. **2:** There are plenty of options for “B.S.-free” beer at Plow Brewing Company. **3:** Both HenHouse tasting rooms sell kegs as well as canned and draft beer.



## The Little Guys of Sonoma

Far ahead of Napa, Sonoma County is practically fluent in hops. But while crowds flock to the well-known Russian River Brewing Company and Lagunitas, consider checking out these delicious and low-key breweries that does things differently.

### 1. OLD POSSUM BREWING CO.

Sonoma County’s newest craft brewery opened this April in a south Santa Rosa industrial park. Old Possum is all about local ingredients and sustainable practices, using recycled wine barrels for aging and natural gas to cut energy usage, and feeding its spent grains to animals at local farms. Plus, lead brewer Sandro Tamburin has a double life as a winemaker, just like Zacherle. [oldpossumbrewing.com](http://oldpossumbrewing.com).

### 2. PLOW BREWING COMPANY

With stints at both Lagunitas and Russian River under his belt, in addition to a short foray into wine, Plow Brewing founder Kevin Robinson refuses to subscribe to corporate trends and makes what he calls “B.S.-free” beer—meaning no extracts, infusions, fake flavoring, or bulk chemicals. Zacherle would approve, as he has asked, “Whatever happened to a good, solid porter?” [plowbrewing.com](http://plowbrewing.com).

### 3. HENHOUSE BREWING COMPANY

A favorite of locals, HenHouse now has two taprooms: one in Santa Rosa and a new outpost next to Lagunitas in Petaluma. You won’t find your typical lineup of IPAs here; HenHouse specializes in barrel aging and funky sour brews. [henhousebrewing.com](http://henhousebrewing.com).



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he says. “We put more emphasis on the ingredients and where they come from. Most breweries can’t specifically say, ‘These ingredients we’re using in our beers are this variety, of this origin and this place, and we know exactly where our water is [from].’”

Even Zacherle’s brewing process is hyperlocal. Originally, he worked with supersmall craft maltsters nearby, but he eventually acquired the equipment to do it all himself, building his own malt house in 2016. Now, he mills the barley right in town, floor malts it in-house, and ages almost all of his beers in French oak barrels.

Moreover, he goes the extra mile to carbonate his kegs and bottles naturally, enabling the beer to age up to nine additional months and deepen in flavor.

Mad Fritz beers cannot be duplicated, not even batch to batch, which is why Zacherle has no qualms about putting his recipes on the label. Each beer has subtle variations in profile and flavor that are directly representative of the places its ingredients came from, just like wine. “It becomes an imprint,” Zacherle says. “Your thumb and my thumb may look similar, but there are these subtle differences. That’s what origin beer is.”

The process is not cheap, either. “We pay between three to five times what most breweries pay for our raw materials because we feel it makes a difference and differentiates our beers,” he says.

That extra chunk of change is another big reason why few breweries make origin beer. To cover his ingredient costs, Zacherle has had to raise the prices on his beers. On average, his beers are priced at \$1 per ounce.

Again, this isn’t anything out of the ordinary in the wine industry, where high-cost, premium grapes naturally result in a higher price, but it’s an entirely new concept for beer drinkers. “We need to get the beer consumer to say, ‘I’m going to pay \$2 more a glass because I know this is 100 percent California beer.’ Because the brewers make the effort and pay the money to make a single-state beer, you should charge more for it,” says Zacherle. “It should be designated. We need to get people to add a little more credence to origin.”

Educating the consumer on the why and how of Mad Fritz beers is key for Zacherle, but he hasn’t always had an easy time doing so. Until recently, getting your hands on Mad Fritz drinks was quite the challenge. Outside of Ma(i)sonry and K. Laz in Yountville, it was impossible to purchase bottles locally for off-premise consumption; brews were distributed through a club membership instead. Unfortunately, that club is full, with a long waiting list. The only other way to taste Mad Fritz was to track down the select few Napa Valley and Bay Area restaurants that offered pints.

But that all changed in April, when Zacherle opened a Mad Fritz taproom in St. Helena. Located on Vidovich Avenue, the modest, no-frills taproom features nine to 11 beers on tap at all times, as well as bottles for purchase. It is open every day from 12:30 to 6 p.m.

“We really haven’t had the opportunity to taste people on the beer,” says Zacherle. “The taproom gives us the ability to showcase our beers and maybe expand our offerings in a different way.”