

## **Every Beer Tells a Story**

*In Buffalo Bayou Brewing Company, one man has found a way to express his love of beer and of Houston all at once*

“This is my life.”

It's 9 AM on a Saturday morning in April. Rassul Zarinfar, co-owner and co-founder of Buffalo Bayou Brewing Co., is sitting in his office at the brewery, going over end-of-quarter numbers with an accountant.

“This is the part where, when people say, 'You founded a brewery, you're living the dream,' I have to say, 'This is the dream.' It is literally waking up at 7 AM, hoping you're not late for a meeting where everything is being written down and legally binding decisions are being made,” Zarinfar continues. “Later, I have to babysit a bunch of drunk people,” referring to the open-house tours that come through every Saturday. (Zarinfar usually does not personally host the tour, but his regular tour guide cancelled.) The event room is empty, save the multicolored streamers left hanging from a previous party—“I got another party tonight, I'm just gonna leave those up”—but it will later be filled with those people, sampling beers, looking at the tanks, and asking Zarinfar questions about his process. For now, though, the warehouse is quiet, the only sounds of activity being the accountant's work and our conversation.

At 31, Zarinfar is one of the two co-founders of Buffalo Bayou Brewing Company and handles the business half of the equation. (The other co-founder, Ryan Robertson, is the head brewmaster.) Zarinfar may complain about the responsibilities of his job, but the smile on his face betrays that this is very much a labor of love for him.

Even as microbreweries began growing widespread across America over the last twenty years, Texas, and the Houston area in particular, seemed to have been left behind. Brock Wagner and Kevin Bartol founded Saint Arnold Brewing Company in 1994, but for a long time they were the only

microbrewery in town. That changed in 2007, when Dave Fougeron, then head brewer of Saint Arnold, left to open Southern Star Brewing Company in Conroe. Their first beers went on sale in 2008.

He seems to have kicked off a trend: Between 2010 and 2011, No Label Brewing was founded in Katy, Karbach Brewing and Buffalo Bayou Brewing Company were founded in Houston, and all three began production not long thereafter. Two more craft breweries, 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder Brewery in Houston and Lone Pint Brewery in Magnolia, were founded in 2012 and released their first batches of beers soon after that. (Lone Pint's first release was in December; 8<sup>th</sup> Wonder's was in March.)

Despite the large number of breweries and the obvious competition for the same beer drinkers, the new breweries are generally cooperative and on good terms. As Jennifer Royo, co-founder and director of marketing for No Label puts it, “The thinking is, there are plenty of taplines to go around.”

Zarinfar tells a story of running out of glycol, a chemical necessary for chilling beer, and having to borrow some from No Label. “It was like going to the neighbor's to borrow a cup of sugar.”

I ask Zarinfar why so many breweries started at the same time. He can't speak for other people's motivations, except to suggest that they all saw the same deficiency in the local market, but he tells me more about his own reasons.

“No one in town was brewing the beer that I like to drink,” Zarinfar explains. “And, you know, the most gut-wrenching question people ask me is, 'Historically, Texas has been five or six years behind national trends. When do you think we'll catch up?' And that question makes me viscerally angry... it's a travesty that we have people leading the conversation in brewing outside of Texas, and no one in Texas is leading the conversation in brewing concepts—at least not five years ago, or even two years ago. So what we set out to do from the beginning, is to say 'You know what, let's make people outside of Texas look here and start following us, rather than us following them.'”

Zarinfar has an appreciation for Texas culture that is common among natives but unique to a transplant like himself, who grew up in Maine before attending Rice University. As he explains, the

cultures of Maine and Texas are very similar—“Live and let live”—and he cherishes both the unique independent spirit of Texas as well as the complex diversity of Houston's population and the sense of local community therein. “Everywhere you go in this city, there's something amazing going on, but it's not glitzy or oversold. I've always said Houston kind of sucks to visit for 24 hours, but it's an amazing place to live for years.”

His sense of history comes through as he tells me about Buffalo Sunset, one of Buffalo Bayou's creations currently on tap at the brewery. They worked with a local coffee roaster, Max Gonzalez of Amaya Roasting and Catalina Coffee—Zarinfar describes him as “one of the greatest flavor nerds in town”—to brew a black IPA with coffee, using beans specially roasted for the job. The name, he explains, comes from the Sunset Coffee Building, “The oldest building on Buffalo Bayou, the original place where coffee was imported and roasted in Houston. [This beer] is an opportunity to tell a story and to share that with people.”

Buffalo Bayou Brewing might never have happened if Zarinfar wasn't willing to reach out and take a risk when looking for a brewmaster.

“[Ryan] was running a brewpub in Dallas. I posted a job offering on probrewer.com, and... no one replied,” Zarinfar deadpans. He can't keep from laughing his way through the rest of the story: “So then, I went to everyone *else's* job postings, and I read people's submissions for *other* people's job openings.

“So it must have been creepy [for Ryan], because I called him out of the blue, and said, 'Hey, I saw you posted for this job opening in Austin—does that mean you're interested in moving? I like your resumé. Let's talk!' And he must have been like, 'Who is this guy?’”

Zarinfar and Robertson began talking and found they shared the same values and vision for what kind of beer they wanted to brew. “Then I went and tasted his beer, and he was brewing all the normal, boring beers you have to brew for a brewpub, but they were all technically perfect. And then he

shared his secret stash with me.”

Zarinfar describes his first time trying Robertson's beer almost like he is trying to maintain composure on a first date. “It was like when you meet a girl who's really cute, for the first time, and you can't tell her how cute she is... I'm tasting his beer, saying, 'Yeah, it's okay... I'll get back to you.’”

Zarinfar's admiration for Robertson's work hasn't lessened with time. “I consider beer an art,” Zarinfar says as he indicates the “Idea Board” in his office, with lists of beer styles, malt and hops varieties, creative inspirations, and specialty ingredients. “You look at what Ryan's doing with his flavors—ginger citrus (IPA), the Buffalo Sunset—and it's art.” He compares the meshing of flavors to jazz, where the sum is greater than the parts. “You can't pick out the ginger individually from the ginger citrus IPA, but if it isn't there, you know something's missing.”

I ask him about the list on the idea board labeled “Impossibles.”

“Our goal before we set out to do this... We laid out that list of impossibles—onion, garlic, basil, cilantro, tarragon—” the list ends with “Redemption,” which he explains is a joke on him—“Before we even opened, we said, we need to put [one of those] into a beer, and that is how we're gonna know we've made our creative goals. Because you show me a skier who hasn't broken his legs, and I'll show you a chickenshit who hasn't tried their hardest slope.

“So we set out to try the hardest slopes, to challenge ourselves with adjuncts (supplemental brewing ingredients added for flavor). And Wit the F, actually, was our fifth beer we released, and had basil in it—and we sold eighty kegs of a basil beer, which I'm really proud of.

“What we're trying to do is create the most innovative beer on the planet,” Zarinfar says. “We could have an IPA, a wheat, an amber, and a lager in our lineup, and we could fill these tanks and empty them, and we could have our beer in cans in every Walgreens in town, but that's not our game.

“My major goal is to dethrone wine, and show that it's boring. It's to make beer an art, to make beer something that is as good or better than wine. When you go to an incredible dinner, everyone talks about wine pairings—I don't want to talk about wine pairings, I want to talk about beer pairings.”

While Zarinfar prefers to leave the creative art of brewing to Robertson, he is quite particular about the business side, crediting his experience as a beer distributor with making him so detail-oriented and “process-driven”. “Do it the same way every single time, so you can focus on the next level [of ideas].”

He gives an example of the kind of precision he tries to instill in his employees:

“It is never acceptable for a salesperson to say that they don't know the hops in a beer. So we have internal contests [to test their knowledge].

“What hops are in 1836? Cascade, Willamette,”—pronounced “Will-AM-ett”—“East Kent Golding. If you say 'Will-uh-MET,' I will yell at you. If you say them in a different order, I will yell at you. It's not Willamette, East Kent Golding, and Cascade. That's how you make mistakes. That's how you forget.

“You say it the same way every single time, and then you know your beer inside and out.”

After the afternoon tour (really more of an open house) comes in, I get to watch Zarinfar in action with beer lovers and potential customers. He spends most of the session by the brewing tanks, fielding questions from patrons that are similar to the ones I've been asking him. Why did he start a brewery? Where does he get his ideas? What are his goals for Buffalo Bayou?

As he told me, “We've got beer community goals, flavor goals, creative goals. We've got financial goals, too; we are a business... but what's beautiful about charging for your beer is, people will buy it if it's good and they will not if it's bad.

“And the beer community will forgive you if you're failing for the right reasons—if you're being creative, putting out new ideas, trying to lead the conversation. They will not if you're failing for the wrong reasons: if you're following [trends], chasing cash, contributing nothing new.”