

Divine Approval for a Divine Brew

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In recent years a number of breweries, from the tiny 300 barrels/year Tuck's in Portland, OR to giants like Coors and Miller, and including Redhook, Boston Beer, Lion, Ramapo Valley, and Shmaltz Brewing (makers of He'brew), have become kosher certified. Others have considered it but not applied for certification with reasons resonating like Morgan Wolaver's "We had dialogue in the company but weren't sure of the process and costs and did not explore it further" and Rogue's Jack Joyce's "It's one of many things on our priority list." Why are some breweries getting kosher certified and how difficult and costly is it?

It turns out that obtaining kosher certification generally need not be difficult nor lengthy, to the surprise of many, and also is not very expensive, as these certified breweries have learned. Al Triplett, Vice President of Brewing at Redhook says "It's just like an inspection by the state. It's worthwhile and a good validation of our production process and plant food safety. They have a lot of experience and we always learn something by examining our processes through a different set of eyes." Redhook also was the only brewery of the group willing to share cost information and said the total annual expenditure for their two breweries was \$8400.

Even the label changes seem to be relatively easy. While just adding a kosher certification symbol to the label still requires approval of Treasury's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), Art Resnick of the TTB's Advertising, Labeling, and Formulation Division indicates that it could take only 1-2 weeks, especially if that is the only change being made. Resnick says that the average processing time for obtaining a Certificate of Label Approval for electronic submittals is 5 days. Grant Wood, a Senior Brewer at Boston Beer, notes that they simply make the modification when they are making other changes and do not go through a separate label approval process.

Perhaps the best reason to get certification was provided by Hugh Sisson, CEO of Clipper City which is not kosher certified but has considered it. Hugh simply avowed that "I want to make it so that as many people as possible can enjoy my great beers."

To Rabbi Seth Mandel of the Orthodox Union, the largest kosher certifying organization in the world, "It's mostly a quality assurance issue. Kosher generally implies an extra level of purity, cleanliness and supervision to the public. It's an extra, trained set of eyes proving that the ingredients are pure and not tainted in any way, and that the brewery is taking extra steps to maintain quality." A 2005 report on kosher foods by Mintel International found that 55% of their survey respondents bought kosher products because they believe the products to be either healthier or safer. A number of respondents referred to the certification symbol, or Hechsher, as the equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

Sometimes the impetus for applying for certification is some special person or event. Redhook was the first major craft brewer to obtain certification due to the efforts of one particular salesman who promoted the idea in 1997. While they cannot determine any exact sales attributed to the certification, Redhook notes that sales are doing very well, especially in the New York area and on the East Coast, and it has provided for large Redhook supermarket displays in some areas. Boston Beer's certification

in November, 2005 was initiated because their new importer in Israel required it, an impetus also for Baltika and a thought that, upon reflection, Jack Joyce said "...just moved it up on our priority list."

Naturally there also is the specialty market for kosher goods. Harper's Magazine, in a 2005 article on kosher foods, noted that the average American supermarket carries over 13,000 kosher products. A kosher approval symbol, or hechsher, is looked for by observant Jews, Seventh day Adventists, and Muslims, as well as vegetarians and people who are lactose-intolerant. Brewer Max Tieger of Tucks's, which is located next to the Mittelman Jewish Community Center, asked the JCC's Rabbi Moshe Wilhelm to bless the brewery and learned it would first have to be kosher. Now Tuck's not only brews kosher beer, but provides free beer to orthodox Jews on the Sabbath since they cannot carry money from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Tieger says "It's nice to help people and it enriches both my customers and myself."

Many breweries believe that beer is inherently kosher, as recently stated by Anheuser-Busch which wrote "We have elected not to pursue kosher labeling. Brewing beer, by virtue of its ingredients and process, is inherently kosher." Rabbi Mandel makes it clear that is not the case. He asserts that "The market is seeing brewing and beer as they were 70 years ago, and not now with the current ability to use special enhancements for growing yeasts, enzymes in various phases of brewing, and potentially non-kosher filters."

Kosher rules have been shrouded in mystery to the general American public since the first license application in 1660. While it is not that difficult to understand the barest essentials of Jewish kosher laws, or Kashrut, as Admiral Richover once said "The devil is in the details." Foods, under Kashrut are either kosher or non-kosher, the latter including animal products from various non-kosher animals including pigs and fish without fins or scales. Among kosher foods, there are meat dishes, dairy dishes, and foods labeled "parve" or "pareve" which are neither meat nor dairy. Examples of parve include fruits and vegetables. Meat and dairy products cannot be eaten together but parve can be eaten with either. Beer is a parve product. Add the concept of cleanliness and you have a basic understanding.

There are well over 50 kosher certifying organizations across the U.S. and probably a great many more. Many are known by short nicknames, often related to their hechsher, such as OU, Star-K, OK, and KofK. OU, the largest, certifies Redhook, Coors and Lion. Although headquartered in New York, they and others work with a network of local rabbis across the country. Boston Beer is certified by Star-K of Baltimore and Miller by OK Kosher of Brooklyn, NY.

Choosing a certifier was not difficult for Redhook, which was initially guided by the interested salesman, or Grant Wood at Sam Adams, who provided expertise on general industry brewing practices over the years to Rabbi Rosen at Star K, prior to Star-K being selected by their Israeli importer. Every company and certifier proudly regaled the warm relationship they have with their counterparts, and how important that trust relationship was. As Rabbi Rosen said "The friendship is integral to the process." Choosing a local certifier is certainly a good option, and one selected by Briess Malt & Ingredients which uses the nearby UM Kosher of St. Paul, MN. Ramapo Valley also went local, working with local Rabbi Zushe Blech from Monsey, NY.

After contact is made with a certifying agency, the detective work begins. The general approach among the larger certifiers is similar. First, two lists are compiled, either through filling out a form or through discussions. One details all the ingredients in the brewery and the other contains the items that should be kosher certified. Ingredients include all preservatives, stabilizers, and cleansing agents. The certifying agency assesses every ingredient, although often this is accomplished through the

documentation from suppliers attesting to the kosher certification of their products. At times the rabbis may also visit the suppliers. They also will visit contract breweries prior to certification of a line of beers.

Next an initial brewery visit is scheduled which can take 3-7 hours for a brewery depending on the complexity of the brewing process and facility. They look in every nook and cranny, examining each small detail including, for kosher purposes, how hot the cleaning water is, the volume and flow of the water, and whether insects can contaminate the process at any point.

Generally malted barley and fresh or pelletized hops are not a concern, but hop and malt extracts by nature of the extracting process and any enzymes, colorings, flavorings and filters have to be specially examined. Easy alternatives are usually available for any problems. For instance, the largest producer of food-grade enzymes, Novozymes, is kosher certified, as are Lallemand yeasts, marketed in the U.S. by Crosby and Baker.

Yeast propagation is reviewed since some processes use non-kosher animal products as a growing medium or to spur reproduction. Yeast cultivation methods at both Redhook and Tuck's were among the very few changes that were reported across the breweries and certifying agencies. Rabbi Mandel notes that in 50 cases, maybe one or two would have a yeast issue. Coors and Boston Beer report there were no changes to their brewing processes because of the review, even though the 20+ Sam Adams beers use a number of flavorings.

Any animal products and grape contact also need to be reviewed. The animal product review is for obvious concerns about the possibility of a non-kosher animal as well as whether the resulting beer may no longer be parve. There are special kosher regulations related to grapes, partly based on who has handled them. Yeasts that could have dual roles in both champagne or non-kosher wine making and Barleywine brewing would need to be reviewed. Also, lactose added to milk stouts would make these stouts not parve.

Clarifiers must be examined since some gelatins and standard isinglass are made using non-kosher biota. While isinglass could be a problem especially for many cask conditioned beers, kosher isinglass and gelatin are available in the marketplace and diatomaceous earth, Irish Moss, and paper filters are fine.

Briess makes a variety of dairy products in the same facilities that some of their malt extract is made. While this is not an issue for most breweries, Briess' Quality Control Manager, Brad Rush, said the cleansing that occurs during switchover was reviewed and additional chart recorders were required to ensure proper boiling water temperatures and volume flow occurred for ritual cleansing, and these "...helped me get better control of our process." Rush added that the inspection was similar to that of the state and most of the checking was for animal products. Rush notes that the certifier "needs to get a feeling of the process flow and ingredients and that, once they are comfortable with these, things move quickly."

When certification is received, it is generally for one year. During that year, depending on the complexity of the facility, there usually will be 2-4 visits although local rabbis may drop in more often. In most cases these are unannounced but, in a few cases, there may be short notice. These periodic reviews normally take 60-90 minutes. As Rabbi Rosen said "You have to know your plant, but in most big brewing operations they will not change the production processes."

The certification contract, signed at the time of the request for certification, includes a clause to notify the approving organization about any changes to the ingredients, products, or processes. Thus, when switching brewing of Blue Moon Wit from Memphis to Golden, Coors needed to amend both the list of ingredients at the Golden facility as well as the list of beers being made and needing certification. Molson, since the merger with Coors, is in the process of getting kosher approval.

Two special situations, both related to the Jewish holiday of Passover, came up during conversations about kosher certification. Rabbi Rosen mentioned that Israeli kosher laws add a few wrinkles that are, in some ways, more strict than in the U.S. Thus, he had to certify to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel that the Sam Adams beers being imported were made with old barley; barley that rooted prior to the second day of Passover.

The other is the Passover Honey Beer made by Ramapo Valley Brewery in Hillburn, NY. During Passover some foods which are acceptable during the year are not permitted for the holiday, including fermented grain products from wheat, barley, oats, rye and spelt. Passover Honey Beer presents an paradox since beer is a fermented grain by definition. Ramapo Valley avoids this by eliminating the malted barley and primarily using amber honey for fermentation. While many believe the beer more correctly should be labeled mead, Daniel Scott, Ramapo Valley co-founder and production manager, says "It has hops like beer and feels and tastes like beer." Rabbi Blech notes that this brew harkens back to the ancient beers which were made with various fruits and spices and is essentially a modern version of some of the earliest beers.

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