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Brewing Exhibit Taps Into History

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By [ANDY BATTAGLIA](#)

Blue mildew, spider mites and prohibition would make life difficult for any living thing, but they proved especially fateful for hops—the flowering ingredient fundamental to beer—in New York around the turn of the century. At the time, New York state was the nation's leading producer of hops, with a buzzing beer industry in the city making lucrative use of the plant. Then came an agricultural blight and 13 years of alcoholic illegality, and the noble story of hops in New York came to an abrupt close.



New-York Historical Society

A ceramic mug, circa 1915, from the Atlantic Beer Garden

But beer, of course, would stage a momentous comeback—one surveyed to intoxicating effect in "Beer Here: Brewing New York's History," an exhibition opening Friday at the New-York Historical Society.

"Beer is one of those things that we take for granted, but when you scratch a little bit and start to look at the history, it has a long tradition in New York," said Debra Schmidt Bach, co-curator of the show.

Added her curating partner, Nina Nazionale, "Beer gave us an opportunity to look at many facets of our collections here, both in the museum and the library, that connect with technology, social history, production and consumption in New York."

It also allowed them to build a bar inside the recently renovated museum and call it a "gallery."

It's there, after ambling through a history that begins in the 17th century, that the past becomes present, by way of 14 present-day local brews on offer to taste. "We wanted people to get a sense of what's going on with beer now and how many creative people are out there," Ms. Nazionale said.

The brewers who have established the city's reputation in the current microbrew craze have a long lineage to uphold,



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Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal

Curators Nina Nazionale and Debra Schmidt Bach with vintage beer bottle

beginning with the area's first public brewery, established by the Dutch East India Company in 1632. Tax records for beer in New York date back to the 1640s, and traces of its presence have accumulated ever since.

"Beer was such a part of common life, and it had nutritional value, so in the colonial era beer was safer to drink than water," Ms. Schmidt Bach said. During the Revolutionary War, troops took beer as

part of their food rations—so much so that the exhibit includes the account book of a New York brewer, William D. Faulkner, who sold beer to both the Continental and British armies. It also figures into the story of immigration in the city, especially among German-Americans who popularized the making of lager in America and plied children with glasses of "kinder beer."

Among the exhibit's early beer-making artifacts are the saws and drills used for ice-harvesting, a thriving industry before the advent of refrigeration, wherein ice was cut from upstate lakes and shipped by boat to the city. "Ice was expensive!" Ms. Schmidt Bach said. Elsewhere stands one of the earliest bottle-capping machines, which introduced the first dependably airtight vessels for beer in 1892.

There is of course a wealth of material relating to the temperance movement that led to Prohibition from 1920 to 1933. "What price prosperity?" reads one protest sticker. "Let people differ!" What few visitors may realize, though, is that New York state enacted its own short-lived prohibition initiative—the Act for the Prevention of Intemperance, Pauperism, and Crime—in 1855, 65 years before the U.S. Constitution was amended.



New-York Historical Society

A medallion honoring New York's prohibition effort of 1855

Another section is devoted to the fanfare that attended the election of "Miss Rheingold" from the 1940s into the '60s, when a series of bombshells courted the votes of millions in the city.

By that point in the tour, museumgoers may yearn for the final section—the bar. The contemporary swell of artisan brewers at work in New York now echoes what came before. "What's going on in craft beer is not a fad or a trend—it's a return to normality," said Garrett Oliver, brewmaster at Brooklyn Brewery and editor of "The Oxford Companion to Beer," as well as one of several local brewers scheduled to make appearances during

the exhibit's run through early September. "One hundred years ago, we had the most interesting and diverse food culture on the face on the Earth here. For a while we papered that over and lost it to industrial food practices. We had everything and managed to lose it. Now we're getting it back."

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