



TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES

HOW BREWERIES ARE ADAPTING FOR COLD WEATHER AND THE WINTER

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This fall, Justin Hyde needed a cure for the coming cold weather. With temperatures falling and snow soon to follow, the director of pub operations for 10 Barrel Brewing, in Bend, Oregon, began brainstorming options for outdoor dining.

The state-mandated closures of indoor dining left him with fifty potential patio customers at 10 Barrel's westside pub. Erecting plastic domes didn't match the brewery's rustic style, and tents and heaters seemed pretty pedestrian. Hyde had a hunch: Could 10 Barrel install little cabins around the brewpub's picnic tables?

Hyde hired his brother, a general contractor, to build three wooden huts arranged around a central fire pit. The "pub huts," as they're called, feature windows, lights, heaters and an angled tin roof. Each refuge can fit up to 10 people, warm and cozy enough for pizza and beers. "Being willing to sit outdoors might be a reality if you want to have a beer with friends this winter," Hyde says.

The ongoing pandemic has forced breweries to constantly adapt. Since spring, breweries have turned to e-commerce and home delivery, repurposing everything from pastures to sidewalks and parking lots to safely serve beer drinkers outside. With winter here, agile breweries are again getting creative in drawing consumers.

Excelsior Brewing Company in Excelsior, Minnesota, partnered with ice-shelter manufacturer Clam Outdoors to offer six ice houses that can seat eight, the structures featuring festive holiday lights and a portable heater. Pilot Project Brewing, a brewery incubator in Chicago, installed four heated cabanas that can seat up to 16 and dogs too. Forgotten Star Brewing, also in Minnesota, is building an ice rink with an eye toward hosting curling leagues.

Inaction isn't an option for breweries looking to survive till spring and beyond. "I think everybody's natural reaction is to freeze and feel sorry for yourself," says Bobby Slattery, the founder of Fifty West Brewing in Cincinnati, Ohio. "When everybody does that, it means there's opportunity somewhere."

Unique Structures Provide Shelter from the Cold

Sitting indoors at breweries and sipping cold beer won't be permissible for most people this winter. In the absence of inside, breweries in colder climates are making the outdoors more appealing with structures that take away winter's chill and provide experiential thrills.

Batson River Brewing in Kennebunkport, Maine, built six nautically themed fish shacks that are private, heated and can seat six. Lakefront Brewery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, installed five greenhouses repurposed as "hop houses," each outfitted with an electric heater, rug-topped wooden floor and white-tablecloth tables.

Across the country, transparent igloos and domes have become a favored outdoor option everywhere from Spice Trade Brewing in Greenwood Village, Colorado, to Hi-Wire Brewing in Asheville, North Carolina. Welltown Brewing of Tulsa, Oklahoma, created the rooftop “Iglotown” with six structures equipped with Bluetooth speakers.

Solemn Oath Brewery in Naperville, Illinois, located about 30 miles west of Chicago, created the Community Dome Forest by transforming its adjacent parking lot into a fairy tale wonderland filled with mulch, fake trees, fire pits and a dozen domes. “We’re really good at bringing people together in a unique way,” says founder and president John Barley.

When the state of Illinois permitted outdoor seating in early June, the brewery quickly created a 4,200-square-foot beer garden filled with socially distanced picnic tables. “It was an awesome way to continue to keep serving fresh local beer to our community,” Barley says.

Sales of packaged beer are great, but the draft beer sold on-premise offers far higher profit margins. “Given that we’re a small brewery, our front-of-house sales offset many of our costs,” says Barley, who sees on-premise sales as “vital.”

Safety is also paramount. Employees deep-clean the brewery’s domes with surface sanitizer and an electrostatic fogger that disperses disinfecting mist. Solemn Oath spent around \$30,000 on winterization efforts, but sales were up nearly 20 percent in the last two weeks of November, compared to 2019. “People appreciate that they get to experience a different space,” says Eric Hobbs, the chief operations officer. “That’s a premium right now.”

Baerlic Brewing president Ben Parsons understands constraints. His Portland, Oregon, brewery’s taproom is 1,200 mostly useless square feet, given the state’s indoor dining restrictions. In the spring, the brewery turned its 6,000-square-foot parking lot into the Super Secret Beer Club, a beer garden with fake green foliage fancying up the fence.

With cold weather looming, Parson eyed the next-door sports bar that closed in the early spring. “The vastness was really appealing,” he says. Baerlic teamed up with Ranch Pizza to build the 6,000-square-foot “piehall” that channels a breezy beer garden, save for clouds and sun. Instead, there are ten spinning ceiling fans, high-performance MERV 13 air filters cleansing the air and doors propped open during service.

Creating safe and compelling gathering spaces is now the brewery’s long-term strategy. “Six months ago, it was a Hail Mary to make [the parking lot] work. This is our next big step to get out of this.”

The Ice is Right: Giving Customers a Reason to Stay Outside

Even if you’re brewing the world’s best IPA, asking customers to shiver outdoors is difficult. To increase the icy attraction, breweries are turning properties into winter wonderlands that make layering clothes worth the effort.

Wallenpaupack Brewing is in the wooded heart of Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, where “one of the quintessential nighttime things we do is build campfires,” says Becky Ryan, the CEO. “That’s such a big draw.”

In a typical year, Wallenpaupack would shut its outdoor space and direct customers Inside. In the pandemic year, the brewery ringed its two propane-powered stone fire pits with socially distanced picnic tables and started taking reservations for four nightly seatings, up to 20 people per pit. “Even on slower nights like Monday, we’re still seeing guests come out,” Ryan says.

When snow falls, Wallenpaupack might give out snowman-building kits, and the brewery is looking to partner with local vendors for activities such as ice carving. “They are great outdoor activities, and you can adapt with bundling up,” Ryan says.

Fifty West is doubling down on fresh air. This spring, the Cincinnati brewery moved fast to open its long-planned Burger Bar, inspired by 1950s-style root beer stands and fast fooderies such as Shake Shack. “We were slammed,” Slattery says of the outdoor campus, which included well-spaced tables and sand volleyball courts. “That probably was going to end come wintertime. We were never going to let anybody inside our space.”

The brewery sought to keep the good times going with an ice-skating rink. “With COVID I pretty much said, ‘There’s no idea too crazy,’” Slattery says. “People want ways to creatively get out of their house.” Fifty West hired a company to install a 40-foot-by-80-foot rink, kept frozen by a glycol chiller inside a tractor trailer. The set-up includes heated tents, fire pits, holiday lights and warm beverages, some spiked, some for customers of all ages. “It’s really about family and kids,” Slattery says.

Funky Bow Beer Company, in rural Lyman, Maine, also built an ice rink with an eye toward attracting families. It’s the “McDonald’s theory,” says Paul Lorrain, who founded the brewery with son Abraham. “If you get the kids, you’ve got the parents.”

Entertainment is essential to the 25-acre brewery's allure, including live music, pizza oven and an 18-hole championship disc golf course that attracts up to 300 people a week and is popular year-round. "Even in the best of times, we found you can't just offer beer," Lorrain says. "We're just trying to stay up with the times. It's wintertime in Maine and we're on a farm. Give people a nice ice-skating rink and maybe they'll come and have a beer and get some pizza."

The Funky Bow team opted to DIY the rink, leveling the ground and building it from a kit ordered online. Mother Nature supplies the freezing temperatures. "I'm not betting the farm on it," Lorrain says. "If it wins, great. Wonderful. If it doesn't, alright, I'll try something else."

Be Smart About Spending

Cash flow is tight for many breweries, and every dollar counts right now. Still, breweries can still smartly attract customers without huge capital expenditures.

Draught Works in Missoula, Montana, considered installing igloos and ice-fishing shacks, but worries over safety concerns, cleaning protocols and logistics prevented the purchases. Instead, the brewery looked to reward customers who could weather the cold weather with the Polar Pint Pass. Draught Works installed a large thermometer on its patio.

Whenever the temperature dips below 45 degrees Fahrenheit and customers drink a beer outside, they receive one stamp on their card. Collect nine stamps, and the next pint is free. The initiative aims to "incentivize the customer and invest in the customer, rather than the shelters," says Jeff Grant, the brewery's cofounder and cobrewmaster. "We have more people outside when it's less than 45 degrees than I ever thought we would."

Draught Works is unafraid to spend money, but Grants needs to be "damned sure that it's going to work. You don't want to implement a bunch of \$5,000 ideas to bring in \$1,000."

This will be a winter of extreme uncertainty. Restrictions will be enacted then rolled back and rewritten, the shifting pursuit of safety yoyoing breweries around. It's difficult to plan for better days when a calendar is meaningless.

"When you wake up at 2 in the morning and wonder if you have anything to worry about, and sometimes you do, sometimes you don't, now you always do," says Funky Bow's Lorrain.

But with vaccinations underway, breweries must continue to give survival their best shot. The time is ripe experimentation, as these adaptations may fast-track the modern brewery's evolution. Barley of Solemn Oath believes that many creative innovations will become fixtures. "For the long term, our municipality is already talking about how to make our investments worthwhile in a post-COVID world," Barley says.

Bend's 10 Barrel built its pub huts with the possibility for permanence. Come spring, they'll be broken down and placed in storage. "The next winter, the cabins might come out—regardless if things are back to normal," Hyde says. "People may still want that experience."

By Joshua M. Bernstein