

The Beer Geeks: Getting back to their roots

By MERIDETH CANHAM-NELSON
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People often ask how all the beer travel started. The answer is that it stemmed from my desire to be knowledgeable about beer.

We were living in Oakland in the late '80s/early '90s, just when the craft beer industry was beginning to flourish. The San Francisco Bay Area was a focal point of the beer revolution and we consider it the birthplace of our beer passion.

At the time, I was working at a pub that served 28 rotating craft beers. I wanted to be educated about the beers and able to answer customer questions. My husband Chris and I thought the best way to learn would be to go to the source, the breweries themselves.

The February trip on our "Year in Beer" tour was San Francisco for a series of events known collectively as "Beerapalooza." We have traveled frequently to the Bay Area since moving back to the Peninsula 14 years ago and generally take it for granted. However, this trip was a concerted effort to return to our roots. And when I say roots, I mean the very beginning; brewery No. 1 on our list: Triple Rock in Berkeley.

But this time it was different. My beer knowledge had matured and I viewed things with a whole new consciousness. We even corrected a few memories that Chris had from the old days. Like the telephone

game I played as a girl, the more often the stories were told, the more facts changed slightly. Soon enough, you tell the stories so many times that they become truth. Chris was crushed. I took it in stride.

But, returning to our beer roots didn't only mean places. It also meant connecting with the friends who started the journey with us. Our friend Rowdy was a bartender at the pub where I worked, and we spent quite a bit of time with him over the weekend. Rowdy is the original source of our beer knowledge and Chris calls him our Yoda. For his part, Rowdy says the students have surpassed the master.

The biggest surprise, however, happened at the last event of the weekend, the 20th anniversary party for the Celebrator Beer News. A large event, it was held in a ballroom at the Oakland Convention Center. At one point, I looked across the room. I spotted a face that made my eyes squint and my mind turn. Then I registered the face. It was Ted, a regular customer from the pub. Ted and his two friends, Kevin and John, came into the pub every Sunday afternoon. Besides Chris, I think they were my first regulars and probably my favorites.

He was as happy to see me as I was seeing him. And Chris was oddly comforted hearing Ted's nickname for him, "Mr. Merideth." The rich and famous always say that it's important to remember where you came from. It keeps you grounded, they say. Well, I'm not rich or famous, but I do believe that it is important to pay homage to your beginnings. Whoever said that you can't go home again, obviously didn't drink beer.

Merideth Canham-Nelson and her husband Chris Nelson are beer enthusiasts. For more information on the Year in Beer and their other travels, go to thebeergeek.com.

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