

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a beer tap handle, pouring a golden beer with a thick white head of foam into a clear glass. The background is blurred, showing other glasses and bar equipment.

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explosion

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Pacific Coastal
AIRLINES®

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On tap

BC'S CRAFT BEER EXPLOSION

Story and photos by Don Denton



Williams Lake is known as country western kind of place. However, on this Saturday night, 425 people — yes, some are wearing cowboy hats — have turned out for something other than line dancing or discussing the finer points of rodeo. They're here to sample craft beer and discuss the finer points of the hoppiness.

The growth of the craft beer industry in British Columbia has been well documented locally and abroad.

A recent story in the *Los Angeles Times* called East Vancouver the craft beer capital of Canada and detailed a walk through the area's burgeoning brewery district.

Most of the attention has focused on Vancouver and Victoria, but the fact that all 425 tickets for the second annual Williams Lake Craft Beer Festival sold out in less than one day indicates the craft beer revolution has spread throughout the province.

The switch from the big brewers' one-taste-fits-all products began in Victoria in 1984 with the founding of Spinnakers Brewpub, still in operation today at its waterfront location. The brewpub was the second of its kind in BC — a brewpub had opened in Horseshoe Bay in 1982 but lasted only a short time.

Thirty-two years later, Spinnakers is just one of the craft brewers in house for the Cariboo-Chilcotin event. The upstart at the festival is three-year-old Quesnel-based brewer Barkerville Brewing, showcasing its Black Currant Sour Ale.

Eighteen brewers made an appearance at the event of which



Granville Island Brewing's Mike Sharpham is ready for customers as he waits for the start of the 2nd annual Williams Lake Craft Beer Festival in the Thompson Rivers University gymnasium.

only two, Goose Island from Chicago and Scottish brewers Innis & Gunn, were not from BC.

Asked why it was important to be at the event, Granville Island's Michael Sharpham says, "We've always been about making good beer accessible. Vancouver, being a

major city centre with a high population, has been at the forefront of growth in the brewing industry in BC, and as such, beer drinkers in the Lower Mainland are spoiled for choice when it comes to beer.

"Areas that fall farther away from major cities like Vancouver and Victoria often

have a more difficult time getting access to all the beer options available. As an established brewery with over 30 years in the industry, we're in a great place where we can participate in events all over, giving us a chance to share our beer with people thirsty for beer options. While the population in communities like Williams Lake isn't as large as Vancouver, there are still people trying to seek out better beer options and we're glad we can be there to share our passion with them."

The charity beer event, which raises funds for the local hospital, was the brainchild of recent Cariboo transplant Noel Martin. Martin, who had gotten used to the availability of craft beer at his former home in the Lower Mainland, missed that in his new surroundings. Initially, he formed a beer club with a membership of eight like-minded individuals; five years later that number has grown to over a hundred.

Approached by a member of the hospital charity board to set up a fundraising festival, Martin set in motion the Williams Lake Craft Beer Festival. An enthusiastic group of volunteers helped make it a reality.

Williams Lake has the festival; all it needs now is a hometown brewery.

Vancouver is home to over 20 breweries.

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That number is expected to grow by an additional four breweries before the end of 2016. Not all are located in East Vancouver. Granville Island Brewing, which was the first Vancouver craft brewer in 1984, is still located on the island under the Granville Street bridge.

Victoria can boast of a dozen craft brewers, from the local big boys Vancouver Island and Phillips to smaller operations such as Lighthouse, Driftwood and Hoyne, or the even smaller brewpubs such as 4Mile Brewing, Moon Under Water or Swans.

Smaller centres such as Kelowna can boast of a small-but-growing local beer culture with a trio of breweries, Tree Brewing, BNA Brew Co. and the Big Surf Beer Company.

In BC's north, Prince George is home to Pacific Western Brewery, which lists 12 brews on their website.

Some beer connoisseurs are concerned that the explosive growth of the craft beer industry will mean that they'll outgrow their market. Drinkers shouldn't worry though, figures from the BC Liquor Distribution Branch show that the beer market accounts for 70 per cent of alcohol products purchased in this province. The next largest market segment is wine at 17 per cent.

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What will beer drinkers taste in the near future?

Granville Island's Sharpham says, "Trends in beer are constantly changing. About five years ago we saw a rise in the popularity of IPAs and other highly hopped styles. The popularity of super hoppy beers seems to have peaked, and then given rise to India Session Ales. ISAs aim to have a hoppy flavour, but a lower bitterness level and lower alcohol than the IPAs that inspired them, making them more refreshing and more approachable. We have our Two Tides India Session Ale, which fits into the market nicely as it makes a nice introduction for people just getting into hoppy beer styles, and is also a refreshing treat for hop lovers. And hop lovers are definitely here to stay."

Beer drinkers are a big thirsty market and craft brewers across the province are ready to slake their thirst and satisfy their tastebuds — even in cowboy country. ■

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