

# Time to Play

## *THE BRUERY EXCELS IN CRAFTING EXPERIMENTAL AND SPIRIT BARREL-AGED BEERS*

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING  
PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE BRUERY

The lights don't immediately come on when Jeremy Grinke opens the door to The Bruery's massive rickhouse. Normally, that's a bad thing. Not this time. The lack of light focuses the senses on the building's aroma, a sublime mélange of beer and the ghost of spirits past co-mingling in barrels. The Placentia, California, brewery could bottle it as a fragrance and make a mint if they wanted. Several stacks of single-use bourbon barrels stand behind me outside the building, a tiny preview of what lurks in the dark.

The lights eventually flicker on and all is revealed: Row upon glorious row of spirit barrels. Bourbon, rum, gin; each has its own story to tell. "The barrels with the orange heads are Copper & Kings brandy barrels," explains Grinke, The Bruery's Director of Production and former California Central Coast winemaker. "The ones down at the far end with the gray heads are Speyside barrels. They're holding our holiday release beer, Eleven Pipers Piping." He grins. "With a name like that, we had to put them in Speyside barrels."

The barrels, both active and discarded, testify to The Bruery's unwavering commitment to making experimental and barrel-aged beers. They're also the perfect symbol of a brewery whose very existence is an expression of bold experimentation. Its founder, Patrick Rue, was a homebrewer studying to be a lawyer when he realized that

making tarts was considerably more fun than studying torts. He started playing with barrels not too long after he launched The Bruery in 2008. A huge following in the beer geek circuit ensued, and quickly put them at a crossroads. “They wanted to make production and grow the brewery, but they wanted to do so without having to grow the facility,” explains Grinkey. “Lots of small brewers locked into a budget end up making sacrifices to grow and they weren’t willing to do that.”

The solution? Project Quercus Maximus (“Large Oak”), a strategy that saw Rue and company lease a temperature-controlled warehouse and load it up with a bunch of beer-filled barrels. The move increased their ability to make spirit barrel-aged and inventive beers, both through The Bruery and their wilder, funkier sister label Bruery Terreux.

The barrels’ home has moved several times over the years, but they’ve never stopped taking full advantage of the space their inevitable landing spot provides. According to Grinkey’s estimation, about 15,000 barrels and 5,000 casks are used every year to produce about 150 different beers. Most of the brews made have never been

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— JEREMY GRINKEY, The Bruery

created before, yet they routinely come out as excellent expressions of quaffable intrigue. Their consistent track record practically demonstrates scientific precision, even if they reject the notion of being scientists. “We’re brewers,” Grinkey says firmly. “Experimenters yes, but we’re brewers first and foremost.”


There is a certain hierarchy in barrel usage when the time comes to create these new sudsy expressions. “Bourbon and wine barrels are our workhorses,” Grinkey explains. “They account for about 80 percent of our casks. The other 20 percent of barrels are a mix of rum, Scotch, gin, and tequila. They give us plenty of options to play around and we will if we have a concept in mind. However, nailing that concept is critical. A beer that’s perfect for rum-barrel aging will most likely fail miserably in a bourbon barrel. With that being said, we’re constantly experimenting with different barrels, fruits, hops, and grains. We’re not uppity about things, either — we’ll try anything once to see if it works.”

The Bruery’s offices suggest a campus of unbridled creativity blended with the slightest whiff of irreverence. Two skee ball lanes stand a few feet away from cubicles. An antler chandelier hangs over the conference room table by the facility’s main entrance. A mounted jackalope head stoically observes a conversation I have with Grinkey in a different room. They’re a welcome sight — a bland, milquetoast setting wouldn’t compute — because The Bruery doesn’t make bland, milquetoast beers.

This may be an understatement. Grinkey runs down a list of beers that are in the works or close to being released, either to the public or to the die-hard members of their Reserve or Preservation Societies. They’re ready to launch a beer made in a Petillant-Natural,

or Pet-Nat, style, a bottled-before-fermentation method usually reserved for natural sparkling wines. They’re trying their hand at making a beer using the methode champenoise technique (“I never had the chance to try the method as a winemaker, so I figured why not try it with beer?” Grinkey says). They’re also making a Ramos Gin Fizz-inspired beer with Austin’s Jester King Brewery and a beer that riffs on a French 75 cocktail with New Orleans’ NOLA Brewing Company. “We’ve drawn a lot from the culinary and cocktail world recently,” Grinkey states. “When we get excited by a dish that features a certain flavor or spice, it naturally sparks inspiration, and that generates creativity.”

With all the funk The Bruery produces, it’s easy to overlook that they also excel at making traditional styles. This begs the question: Is it tough to focus energy on the mainstream brews amid so much creative mayhem? “If we did the same thing over and over again — you know, like the same lager, the same IPA, the same stout — then we’d be bored,” Grinkey says. “However, because we’re making so many experimental beers, when we do decide to make a ‘regular’ beer like a lager, being able to focus on making something pure and clean that upholds a certain style ends up being an exciting challenge.”

My interview with Grinkey wraps and I walk back to my car, which is parked next to the tasting room. It’s 11:45 AM on a Thursday, and there’s already a crowd huddled by the door, waiting for those pesky minutes standing between them and noon to disappear so they can enter. It’s a mix of old and young, men and women, a community all waiting to step inside and enjoy some fun, trippy local craftsmanship. It’s a cool sight to see. I don’t know what brews are on tap, but I’m guessing they hung out in barrels at one point. 

*The Bruery is located in Placentia, California. For more info visit [www.thebruery.com](http://www.thebruery.com) or call (714) 996-6258.*