

STEREO BREWING
CREATES A
SANCTUARY FOR
MUSIC-LOVING
BEVERAGE
AFICIONADOS

Drinking in Hi-Fi

WRITTEN BY RICH MANNING

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG NAGEL



An eclectic mix of music fills my ears as I drive toward an industrial park in Placentia, California. Classic stuff like Simon & Garfunkel and Van Morrison. New songs by Twenty-One Pilots and Broken Bells. A moldy oldie by Gene Vincent. A “how is this song over twenty-years-old?” ditty from Beck.

This is how one properly prepares to interview Rick Smets and Amanda Pearce Smets, the husband-and-wife duo behind Stereo Brewing. Technically, Rick’s the owner and brewer, and Amanda’s the operations director. They don’t produce spirits but their business and innovation intersect all things craft alcohol, and there are lessons to be learned from people this passionate. Push all that aside, and they’re music geeks — big-time music geeks. Ergo, cranking the radio en route is essential.

Our talk continually oscillates between beer and music with equal doses of nerdiness. Discussions about the nuances of Cascade hops somehow morph into conversations about Grateful Dead shows and Led Zeppelin doing reggae before bouncing back into the wonders of high gravity brewing. The topics occasionally mesh; we spend time breaking down the success of Stereo’s first can series, a limited run of brews named after 1970s proto-punk band Modern Lovers. Eventually, Rick informs me that he’s pushing Stereo toward the Revolver/Sgt. Pepper phase of its existence. He’s working on a collaboration with fellow Placentia brewery and GABF darling The Breuery to make their first single-use bourbon barrel-aged beer in 2019. “I’ve always wanted to try to make a bourbon barrel-aged beer,” he says. “I’m big into the science of brewing, and I’ve long been fascinated by processes like barrel-aged fermentation. I make mash for a living, so it makes sense to play around.” He says his choice to work with the Breuery was an easy one to make, given their massive inventory of bourbon barrels and the fact that their spirit-aged brews are routinely outstanding. The type of barrel to use for his initial foray was also a no-brainer. “Single-use bourbon barrels are kind of the catch-all barrel to use because you’re almost guaranteed to get something fun out of it if you know what you’re doing,” he says. “If we like the results, we may start playing around with rye whiskey, tequila, or mezcal in the future. For now, we’re all pretty



excited getting started with everything.”


Indeed, the pair’s love of music equals Rick’s passion for making his award-winning beers, and it’s something they’ve flaunted freely since they opened for business in 2016. The first beer ever brewed here was named after a Bob Dylan album — appropriate since the two first met at a Dylan concert. The taproom features beers named after Nick Drake songs and Phil Spector recording concepts. Each brew they make comes with its own curated playlist. They host occasional vinyl exchanges. The staff spins records brought in by their customers. It’s Shangri-La for craft beer-loving crate diggers, and it’s precisely what they were aiming to build. “We wanted to create a place that was like a clubhouse, where friends could get together, listen to music, and drink some good beer,” Rick says. “It helps build a sense of community. It’s why we went with the name. It conveys the right vibe.” He’ll also admit that the concept is a bit pragmatic. “I live for music,” he confesses. “Music is my passion, and craft beer is my craft. Stereo allows me to bring the best of both those worlds together.”

It would be cliché to call Rick a rock star of his craft. He has the pedigree for such a designation; after all, he made his bones at craft beer titan Firestone Walker and California cult favorite Left Coast Brewing Company, serving as the latter’s head brewer. Still, given his admitted disdain for ‘70s-era corporatized arena rock bands like Bad Company and Foreigner, it feels more authentic to call him an acclaimed indie rock artist that the cool kids are into. By that rationale, the beer world appreciates him like Pitchfork digs Mitski these days: His creamy Wall of Sound Oatmeal Stout won consecutive golds at the Great American Beer Festival in 2017 and 2018, and his malty-yet-immensely-drinkable Robot IPA took home a silver last year. Stereo’s also poised to live the rock ‘n’ roll in-joke of being “big in Japan” — Wall of Sound is scheduled to ship to the Asian country this year. Rick appreciates the respect he’s received from the industry,

but he emphasizes that such acclaim is ultimately a very cool B-side to what truly matters. “We don’t do what we do to win favor,” he says. “Our goal is to just bring in a steady flow of people — not necessarily beer geeks, but people from the community — and make them happy.”

“They also don’t need to understand the music references, either,” Amanda adds, referring to the beers’ tuneful monikers. “We have an American Pale Ale on the menu called ‘Emotional Rescue.’ Now, we know it’s named after a Rolling Stones song, but it doesn’t matter if the customer knows. They could just be coming into our taproom after a brutal day at work, take one at the name, and think, ‘Oh, man. I need an Emotional Rescue!’”

Although people that don’t know Brian Wilson from Bryan Adams are welcome to stop by for a pint, it should be reiterated that Rick and Amanda are music snobs of the most glorious kind. Some of the house rules revolve around this. Bro-country or anything lyrically referencing red Solo cups are verboten. They don’t dig on Journey, either. “We have a ‘No Journey’ policy here. It’s listed on our application form,” Amanda says. “If the person we’re interviewing brings that up during the interview, we instantly know it’s a person that understands us.”

The music talk continues to wind up, Rick runs to his office at the end of the interview and comes back with albums by The Bats and The Clean, two New Zealand indie bands I’ve never heard of before. I return the volley by bringing up Haken, an obscure British prog band he mishears as Hawkwind, which is another group doomed to an esoteric existence among most of polite society. All this audiophilic weirdness happens over pints of Perfect Day, an IPA named after a Lou Reed song that tastes bright and citrusy (and thankfully not like heroin and anger, because Lou Reed). It’s a great conversation, held over terrific beer in a chill, comfortable setting. It’s exactly what Stereo Brewing Company was designed to provide. 

Stereo Brewing is located in Placentia, California. For more info visit www.stereobrewing.com or call (714)993-3390.