

# THE BACKYARD BREWERS

Despite facing draconian home-brewing legislation, Thai-made craft beers are proving to be just as popular in Bangkok – and elsewhere in Thailand – as their foreign-made counterparts. We meet the discreet figures behind the capital's craft labels, and find they're as diverse as their hop-rich creations

WORDS CRAIG SAURS  
PHOTOGRAPHY GEORGIA KUHN



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n a breezy Saturday afternoon, Wichit Saiklao bounces across his bar, Chit Beer, like a charged atom. In one moment, he is removing an empty keg. In the next, he is leaning against a refrigerator, catching up with a couple of moustachioed Thai hipsters. Then he is scurrying over to a makeshift kitchen, a jumble of white buckets and bags bursting with malt and hops, where the latest pupil in his brewing academy is taking stock of a caramel-coloured liquid that's

bubbling away in a stainless steel pot.

"I have a lot of energy, so going fast is easy for me. I have to remind myself to slow down," Saiklao later tells me over pints of his home-brewed Kölsch. A light, effervescent beer not unlike a lager, he says it's his most popular, attributing its success to local weather conditions. "It's perfect for the hot Thai climate."

Saiklao has been dubbed by Bangkok craft connoisseurs as the "godfather of Thai craft beer", yet he seems like anything but an elder statesman with his runner's build, youthful



vigour and omnipresent smile. Three years ago he founded Chit Beer on Koh Kret, a bucolic, man-made island in the Pak Kret neighbourhood about 20km north of Bangkok's centre. It is not exactly easy to get to the island. From the city centre, the trip requires a minimum of two modes of transportation – car and ferry – and often a train or motorbike ride. But it was the perfect place for Saiklao to open his bar, the first in the country serving only Thai craft beer. “I live across the river,” he begins, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, “and it’s hard for the excise police to get here.”

Every weekend, the city’s cool kids flock to Chit Beer for porters, pale ales and more, available on tap or in bottle. It’s all been brewed at Saiklao’s riverside retreat or at other home-brew operations in Bangkok, of which there are around 200. The beer of the week may be Sandport’s “Too Much Coffee” porter, which has deeply satisfying notes of roasted coffee beans, or Happy New Beer’s intensely hoppy IPA (short for “India Pale Ale”).

Bangkok’s beer aficionados did not always have it so good. As recently as 2011, the market was virtually limited to Singha, Chang and Leo – ubiquitous labels sold in 7-Eleven shelves nationwide. With import-duty rates for alcoholic beverages as high as 60%, and excise rates hovering around the same percentile (plus VAT), bringing foreign craft beer into Thailand had long been cost-prohibitive. Meanwhile, the Liquors Act of 1950 had forbidden individuals from brewing and selling beer, unless they could produce a minimum of 100,000 litres each year. It’s a figure Saiklao claims to be ludicrous: “If I brew literally 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, then only *maybe* could I produce 10,000 litres,” he scoffed.

But change was fermenting. In 2012, the craft-beer scene that was booming in Europe, Australia and the US began trickling into South-East Asia. New importers Beervana and Hopsession set up in Bangkok, bringing in acclaimed beers from the likes of Rogue, Deschutes (both from the US) and Norrebro Bryghus (from Denmark), and distributing to trendy bars such as BREW – Beers & Ciders and Mikkeller. At Mikkeller, a curious (or cavalier) drinker could try any of the 30 beers on draught, including rare finds from Shizuoka-based Baird Beer, Copenhagen’s To Øl and WarPigs, the Mikkeller-Three Floyds collaboration. That same person could return the next week, when the taps had changed, and try entirely different beers.

Yet although foreign craft beer was securing

a place in the public consciousness, its Thai counterpart remained on the fringes. But as brewers like Saiklao emerged, fans followed enthusiastically. “I thought: If I brew beer, people will always want to come see me, or at least they’ll invite me to their parties,” jokes Saiklao. He then describes how a friend he had carpooled with while studying at Georgia Institute of Technology in the US introduced him to the joys of home brewing. “When I came back to Thailand, I promised myself that I would share home-brewed beer with Bangkok, because there just wasn’t a scene for it here. I bought my first [brewing] kit off Amazon in 2012.”

Neither the first quip nor the bona fide answer could explain what compelled Saiklao to then offer brewing lessons at Chit Beer at weekends. Saturdays and Sundays are in fact the only days the bar is open, meaning he was having to entertain his clientele at the same time as teaching tyros what a “wort” is (for the uninitiated, the wort is the liquid containing sugars that yeast eat, leaving alcohol as a by-product).

“I want to create an army of brewers with

how many people can join, they are now booked months in advance. Some sign up for a fun, one-off experience, but others go on to launch their own brands in Thailand. “Triple Pearl, Soi Beer – all of the stickers and labels on my refrigerator behind the bar – those [people] were my students,” said Saiklao.

Although they didn’t learn the ropes from Saiklao, Pieak Pipattanaphon and his business partner, LA-raised Avi Yashaya, have played just as integral a part in raising the banner of Thai craft beer. The two opened Let the Boy Die in late 2015, a slick, brick- and patina-rich craft-beer bar in Bangkok’s Chinatown.

“I definitely could sense the curiosity surrounding craft beer. I just had no idea it would be felt by such a wide audience – young and old, Thai and foreign,” says Yashaya, who organised the popular Brewtopia festivals and occasionally makes his own beer under his Uppercuts Brewing label. “We want to keep setting the standard for what great Thai craft beer is. As new brewers spring up, we can present what we believe is the best.”

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very special beer,” he declares, keeping one eye on a student fiddling with a thermometer in the kitchen space. “I dream of big change, but we’ll never see change unless we fight for it.” So he launched his brewing academy to help spread a passion for craft beer around the country. Now, locally brewed beer can be found in Khon Kaen, Chiang Khan and Chiang Mai.

Somewhat incongruously, Saiklao is also a colonel in the Thai army, with a day job training cadets in electrical engineering. But at weekends he’s teaching the basics of brewing. On Saturdays, he explains beer theory and the market; on Sundays, his students brew their own batches. The next week, they come back to pick up their 50 bottles. Classes cost THB7,500 (about US\$205), and while there is no limit to



A pressure gauge at Chit Beer is able to measure the oxygen in the head space of the beer and the level of carbon dioxide in each batch



Wichit Saiklao of Chit Beer (top left); Avi Yashaya at his Chinatown bar Let the Boy Die (top right); the same bar's taps, below



"Jack" at the Udomsuk Brewing headquarters. He and his band of brewers keep a low profile, yet despite being cloaked in anonymity, their brand has earned some serious street cred

**Art wrapped around a bottle**

All over the world, behind the glass doors of bar-room refrigerators, stand frosty art galleries. Craft-beer labels have transformed their basic brown bottles into ever-evolving exhibitions that are designed to reflect the complex flavours inside the bottle and add another layer of intrigue to discovering new brews.

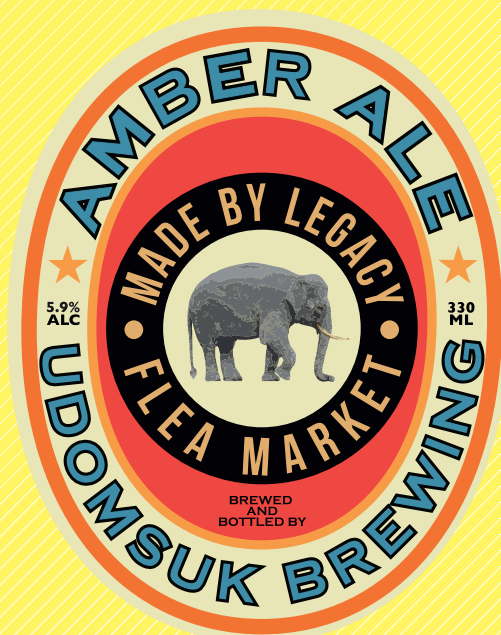
At worst, craft-beer label art amounts to little more than a mélange of colours and bland typefaces on monochrome stickers or poorly defined sketches. But at their best, labels represent local cultures

and throw light on the personalities of the brewers behind the beer.

With so many bright and bold images on the market, brewers differentiate their beer through their visual presentation. Some of the most famous craft brands, such as Brooklyn Brewery and Flying Dog Brewery, hire renowned artists (Milton Glaser and Ralph Steadman, respectively) to create labels that capture the buyers' attention. Sometimes, the design can go beyond merely symbolising the beer; it can enhance its success. According to Nick

Dwyer, creative director of Beavertown Brewery, a bottle with wild branding demands an equally daring product.

While Bangkok's craft brewers work in clandestine quarters, often with small budgets, label art has not suffered. If anything, the appeal of creating art that represents painstakingly produced beer matches the singular thrill of home brewing – like hanging your own painting on your wall, or seeing your name in print, the artwork is yours and yours alone, for all to appreciate.



**The Udomsuk label evolution**

**1** Udomsuk Brewing distinguishes its bottles with an image that's familiar in Bangkok – the Thai ridgeback dog. The brand's initial releases featured a ridgeback on the label banging a snare drum, infusing the beer's European influence with its Thai heritage.

**2** Since then, the design has become sleeker and more modern. The label for the Mad Moa Pale Ale features a stately ridgeback lying forward with a coloured trim contrasting with the white background, while the minimalist white label for the West Coast IPA is an indigo blue.

**3** When Udomsuk recently released its special edition Tank 8 collection at Mad Moa restaurant, the white background was changed to black. The labels still have bold trims – the Belgian Rye a rich, deep crimson – but the ridgeback remained front and centre.

**4** For the Made by Legacy flea market last July, Udomsuk created a limited-edition label for its long-standing Amber Ale. Gone was the ridgeback and in was the indie market's trademark elephant and faded orange-and-blue retro colour scheme on the label.





## “Craft brewers pay attention to high-quality ingredients and brew what makes them happy”

Let the Boy Die serves locally brewed beer out of its six taps on a rotating basis. When I visited on a busy weekend night, the tap list included a hoppy amber ale from Mahanakorn; a couple of IPAs with *Star Wars*-themed names (for example, “Dark Side IPA”), which were both robust and aromatic; and Happy Stout from Pipattanaphon’s own label, Golden Coins. A popular tippie among local hopheads, Happy Stout is infused with local chestnuts, giving it a silky mouth-feel, sweet finish and smoky aroma.

“I started brewing three years ago, after I quit my job as an architect,” Pipattanaphon tells me during a break from pouring pints. He elucidates further that Let the Boy Die took over the space vacated by his mother’s local restaurant. Shortly before she retired, Pipattanaphon had begun to earn underground fame for his stout, sold at

Clockwise from top left: A group of students soak up Wichit Saiklo’s craft beer wisdom at a Chit Beer brewing class; tiki-themed Mad Moa; Let the Boy Die

nearby venues such as SoulBar and through special order over Facebook. “I knew Golden Coins wouldn’t get a permit at that stage,” he recalls, “so I opened a bar.” With Let the Boy Die operating smoothly, Pipattanaphon decided to brew Golden Coins on a larger scale, eventually exporting overseas.

The equally laid-back, but much more vocal Yashaya injected the brazen, forward-minded philosophy of his home state into the Thai craft beer scene. “A good friend of mine from university was super-enthusiastic about home brewing, and California craft is so bold that I soon realised there was no limit to what you could experiment with. Then I was hooked,” he says. When he partnered with Pipattanaphon in 2015, he joined a community more interested in sharing than competing – precisely the reason why he could unite over a dozen brewers at Brewtopia II, a party and festival designed to introduce Thai craft beer and its offbeat culture to anyone willing to try it.

“Craft is about local identity and being experimental,” says Yashaya. “Ideally,

## Bangkok’s best craft beer bars

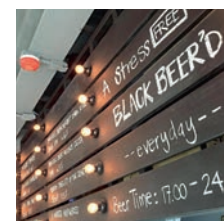
Contrary to popular belief, a fantastic Thai beer is not hard to find. The widest variety is available at **Chit Beer** or **Let the Boy Die**. To get to **Chit Beer**, hire a taxi to the Pak Kret pier in Nonthaburi, then take a ferry across the river at Wat Sanam Neua.

Let the Boy Die is more accessible on Luang Road, next to Klang Hospital. Also in Chinatown, **SoulBar** ([facebook.com/livesoulbarbangkok](https://www.facebook.com/livesoulbarbangkok)) serves bottles of Golden Coins Happy Stout.

Every Friday night, **Junker & Bar** on Soi Suan Phlu ([facebook.com/Junker-and-Bar](https://www.facebook.com/Junker-and-Bar)) sells the week’s selection of Pheebok Beer – it could be a hoppy double IPA or wheat beer. **Black Beer’d** ([facebook.com/blackbeerd](https://www.facebook.com/blackbeerd)) on Thong Lor Soi 9 sometimes sells a local brew of two on draught, such as the Mahanakon Brewing White Ale.

For a guaranteed great beer and meal, visit **Mad Moa** ([facebook.com/madmoa](https://www.facebook.com/madmoa)) on Chakkaphatdi Phong Road. Ask to pair your burger with the current offering from Udomsuk.

**Whiteline** ([facebook.com/whitelinebangkok](https://www.facebook.com/whitelinebangkok)) on Silom Road Soi 8 plays host to beer events and parties, including the last Brewtopia and Brew Revolution.



craft brewers don't try to make the cheapest beer, but pay attention to high-quality ingredients and brew what makes them happy – even if it doesn't connect with the masses or requires out of the ordinary techniques.”

Contrasting with the outgoing Saiklao and Yashaya, and even the quietly fearless Pipattanaphon, are the five friends behind Udomsuk Brewing. The team has kept a low profile, selling under the table at Mad Moa, a popular restaurant in Bangkok's Old Town serving tiki-inspired soul food – pulled pork sandwiches, Spam and potato salads, hot dogs lusciously wrapped in crispy bacon – and at indie weekend markets such as Made by Legacy. “We know it's ridiculous, but these are the regulations, so we do our best to minimise the risk. We take them seriously,” says “Jack”, who wants to withhold his and his partners' real names.

Despite remaining cloaked in anonymity, their brand has earned serious street cred for its repertoire of Belgian-style beers. Udomsuk's Saison brew – similar to an IPA, but infused with aromatic cloves and peppercorns – and their high-gravity Belgian strong ale frequently sell out at Mad Moa. In keeping with the craft-beer credo, however, the partners also experiment with unfamiliar styles. And often.

“We've brewed a Belgian quadruple, a triple bock IPA, a lambic, a white stout, an imperial dark rye IPA – too many to name,” says Jack. “Basically, if we don't have to ‘water the trees’ with it, we debut it at the restaurant or events, because craft beer is about variety.” Later, he jokes that he and his friends got into brewing because “we just wanted to brew what we liked to get drunk with”, but found pleasure in other people not only enjoying, but also understanding their beer.

The Udomsuk boys rarely slow down to think about legal reform or the future of craft beer in Thailand; for them, the process stokes their passion. “If we take short cuts, we'll never create anything different, which is the whole purpose of what we are doing.”

And that is the essence of the Thai craft-beer revolution. It's an ongoing working method of trial and error to satisfy the ever-growing thirst for change – changes in red tape, in styles and trends, and, above all, in attitude. 🍻

**“Craft beer is about local identity and being experimental... even if it doesn't connect with the masses or requires out-of-the-ordinary techniques”**



Soulbar serves bottles of Bangkokian beer Golden Coins Happy Stout (top); each Friday Junker and Bar sells the week's selection of Pheebok Beer

เจ้าพ่อวงการเบียร์คราฟท์หรือเบียร์ทางเลือกอย่าง คุณวิชาติ ชัยเกลา เจ้าของร้านซิตบาร์ บนเกาะเทริด เปิดเผยถึงที่มาที่ไปของร้านว่า ได้เริ่มต้นขึ้นจากความชอบส่วนตัวเมื่อสามปีก่อน โดยขายเฉพาะเบียร์ที่เขามั่นใจในตัวเอง ทุกสุดสัปดาห์จะมีวัยรุ่น และมาชิมเบียร์ริมแม่น้ำที่ร้านของเขา

คอเบียร์กรุงเทพ มักไม่ค่อยมีทางเลือกมากนัก เพราะมีเบียร์สามแบรนด์ใหญ่ครองตลาดอยู่และหาซื้อได้ง่ายทั่วประเทศ ในขณะที่เบียร์นำเข้าก็ต้องเจอกับกำแพงภาษีที่สูงถึง 60% ทำให้คราฟท์เบียร์จากต่างประเทศมีราคาสูงมาก กระทั่งปี 2012 กระแสคราฟท์เบียร์ได้รับความนิยมทั่วโลก คุณวิชาติเองเคยเห็นเพื่อนบ่มเบียร์ที่อเมริกา เมื่อเขากลับมายังกรุงเทพฯ ก็สั่งอุปกรณ์บ่มเบียร์ตัวแรกมาจากเว็บไซต์ในนิวยอร์ก นอกจากนี้จะขายแล้ว คุณวิชาติยังเปิดคลาสสอนบ่มเบียร์ด้วย เพื่อเผยแพร่ความชื่นชอบเบียร์คราฟท์ไปทั่วประเทศ

ร้าน “เลท เดอะ บอย ดาย” ย่านเยาวราช เป็นอีกร้านหนึ่งที่ขายคราฟท์เบียร์ คุณเบ๊ยก พิพัฒนามล และคุณอาวี ยาชายา ตั้งขึ้นมาเมื่อปลายปีก่อน คุณเบ๊ยกเริ่มบ่มเบียร์เองเมื่อสามปีก่อน และได้รับความนิยมจากลูกค้าทางเฟซบุ๊กและร้านไซส์บาร์อย่างรวดเร็ว เขาจึงตัดสินใจเปิดบาร์ของตัวเอง และยังมีแผนส่งออกเบียร์แบรนด์ โกลเด้นคอยน์ส ของตนเองออกต่างประเทศ นอกจากนี้ยังมีกลุ่ม อุตมสุข บรีวอิ้ง ขายคราฟท์เบียร์ที่ร้าน แมต โมอา และตลาดนัดสุดสัปดาห์สำหรับชาวอินดี้ เช่น เมตบายเลกาซี คุณแจ๊คและเพื่อนๆ กล่าวติดตลกว่า พวกเขาเริ่มเข้าวงการนี้เพราะเพียงต้องการได้เครื่องดื่มแบบที่ตนเองต้องการ ซึ่งต้องใช้ทั้งเงินและเวลาในการทดลองเทคนิคและส่วนผสมต่างๆ จนกว่าจะลงตัว และนี่เองคือหัวใจของเบียร์คราฟท์ไทย ความสำเร็จไม่มีทางลัด ต้องลองและยอมผิดพลาด เพื่อสร้างความเปลี่ยนแปลง

JUNKER AND BAR IMAGE: DAVID TERRAZAS