

BEER GEEK

# Cleveland beer scene vs. Tampa

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When I travel to another part of the country that boasts a thriving craft beer scene, I inevitably make mental notes comparing it to Florida's to help gain some perspective. Such was the case when I visited Cleveland to cover the recent International Beer Fest. It wasn't the first time I had explored the city's beer scene; I visited last summer, too, and came away with a lot of respect for it.

Evoking the spirit of an 11th grade English class essay, this column will compare and contrast the Cleveland region with the Tampa Bay area. For the purpose of this exercise, the former roughly encompasses the region of Northeast Ohio between Cleveland in the north and Akron in the south (about 40 miles). The latter stretches north to south along Florida's west coast, from Dunedin to Sarasota (about 60 miles).

Many similarities exist. Both regions labor under impressions from the rest of the country that their craft beer scenes don't have much to offer. Both are experiencing rapid growth, though, and gaining more respect across the country — and around the world.

Each region has a brewery that embraces local history and that has won national awards for its beers. For Cleveland, it's Great Lakes Brewing Co., with such brews as Edmund Fitzgerald Porter, Eliot Ness Amber Lager and Burning River Pale Ale (commemorating the notorious 1969 Cuyahoga River blaze, when the then-heavily polluted waterway caught fire). Tampa has Cigar City Brewing, with products inspired by the city's history such as Jai Alai India Pale Ale, Bolita Double Nut Brown Ale and

Jose Marti American Porter.

The Great Lakes brewery is much bigger than Cigar City, but then it's been expanding since its start in 1988; Cigar City opened 20 years later.

A strong craft beer community marks both places: beer bloggers, beer writers and brewers commingle at events and tasting rooms and collaborate to get the word out to the rest of the world that there's some damn good craft beer around.

According to a database on Beer Me (beerme.com/index.php), the Cleveland area has three more operating small breweries and brewpubs than does the Tampa Bay area: 10 versus 7. Both areas have new breweries in various stages of planning.

Cleveland gets the edge on the culinary front, with more restaurants and pubs creating menus specifically to complement their craft beer selection. For instance, Cleveland's McNulty's Bier Market (bier-markt.com) offers a large rotating selection of draft and bottled beers, many of them Belgian or Belgian-style to pair with a menu heavy on that country's cuisine. That's only one example of dozens of similar food-beer venues throughout the region.

There are certainly inroads being made in that field throughout the Tampa Bay area: the Mad Crow Brewery & Grill in Sarasota and the Tampa Bay Brewing Co. in Ybor City come to mind, and Peg's Cantina in Gulfport.

Cleveland enjoys a livelier beer festival scene, with more of a focus on regional celebrations of craft beer. Cleveland Beer Week culminates with the massive Brewzilla festival. The Cleveland International Beer Festival, which I attended, started only this year, but with more than 200 breweries from around the globe pouring upwards of 800 beers, a sanctioned beer judging and multiple presentations by beer experts across three sessions, it's on its way to being one of the country's major beer events.

Of course, there are several fine beer festivals held throughout our area during the year, but wouldn't it be great to have a Tampa Bay Area Craft Beer Week, where breweries, bars and restaurants hold multiple events to tout the region's growing reputation in the national beer scene?

If the goal is to be mentioned in the same breath as such beer meccas as Denver, San Diego or Portland, Ore., I would have to conclude that Cleveland is just a bit ahead of us in the quest, but we're both well on the way.

