

Name of Interviewees: Brad Benson and Lara Zahaba
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Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
Length of Interview: 44:18 minutes

Theresa McCulla: It's December 6, 2017. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I'm interviewing Brad Benson, co-owner of Stoup Brewing, and we are meeting-, I'm also speaking with Lara Zahaba, director of marketing and communications and co-owner of Stoup. We're meeting at the Brewery here in Seattle, Washington, and this interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in America. So, Lara, I'll start with you. Where and when were you born?

Lara Zahaba: Oh.

[Chuckles]

00:33 Zahaba: The year? The year of my birth? 1969. And I was born on Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, South Dakota.

McCulla: Okay. And who were your parents?

Zahaba: Tom and Jane Zahaba.

McCulla: And, did you grow up in South Dakota?

Zahaba: No. Being born on the Air Force base is probably an indicator that my, my father was in the Air Force. So, we moved around quite a bit when I was young. So, from there, we were in Germany for a few years. We landed in the state of Washington in 1977. Moved around a bit here as well. He went civilian, and we ultimately landed on Bainbridge Island, which is just a thirty-minute ferry ride from downtown Seattle. And my parents are still there.

McCulla: Okay. And Brad, where and when were you born?

01:21 Brad Benson: Spirit Lake, Iowa. 1968.

McCulla: Okay, and who were your parents?

Benson: Robert and Tanya Benson.

McCulla: And did you grow up there?

Benson: I grew up in Iowa until I was probably about ten, and then moved to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

McCulla: Okay. And could you each describe a bit just what it was like growing up where you did, especially in relation to the food and drink culture of that place?

01:42 Zahaba: I have come to understand how profound I think the amount of time that we spent in Germany was in, you know, my, the love that I have for food and beverage as an adult. My parents will laugh because every time we went out to dinner in, wherever we went out to dinner in those, during those years that we were there, like, I would start my order with a plate of escargots, which is probably really unconventional for a kindergartener, but we just had a lot of really adventurous eating experiences. All of our vacations were in Europe. Lots of great memories of Italy. And ultimately, I ended up becoming a student abroad and spent my own, my junior year, in Italy. And following graduation was, all I wanted to do was find a path back to Italy and a way to use the language, and that's what ultimately led me to wine, Italian wine specifically. And, and a twenty-year career on that side of the beverage industry before we opened the brewery. So, my childhood was, I think, very informative for me.

02:50 Benson: Mine was definitely different growing up in Iowa.

[Chuckles]

Benson: So, I mean my vi-, most vivid memories are really, like, corn on the cob, of shucking fresh corn on the cob. Like, going to the field and actually grabbing it. But, you know, it was heavy in beef, and, I mean, I remember fish fries. Going fishing and having neighbors come over and just pan frying, you know, fish and things like that. But, it was a very much middle American, Americana. You know, we had Jello salads and potato salad.

Zahaba: Yeah. You still do.

Benson: Hamburgers. Yep.

Zahaba: Family holidays.

McCulla: To what extent was beer present in that, the food culture of the time?

03:26 Benson: Yeah, I mean, I grew up in kind of an interesting place. It was Iowa Lakeside Laboratory, it was a summer research center for Iowa, Iowa State, and the University of Ames, I think. There were three universities there and it was, it was basically all the botanists, biologists, chemists had a, it was, it was probably a hundred acres on a lake, and basically my parents were the caretakers. And so, they would only be open for three or four months in the summer, but I had this hundred acres that was basically mine to run around in. Me and my sister. And treehouses and all that kind of stuff. But, definitely, you know, there was a, what

they called the mess hall, and so there was this kind of big dining thing that went on every night where all the students would come in and being, you know, well, being born there until I was ten I saw, you know, just, they would have like, they would have one night every summer there'd be some, they would do cheeses, so they'd come out and, you know, being just a, kind of the, the son of an Iowa farm boy, I'd never seen, you know, like, Muenster cheese, or Limburger cheese, which is super stinky. And, I was like, "Why does it smell like dirty socks?" But it was kind of cool to see that big scene of people. I, I helped in the kitchen a lot, like, like I said, shucking corn and peeling potatoes and stuff like that. Probably pre-labor laws or.

Zahaba: Right.

Benson: Child labor laws. But yeah, I mean, for us, a lot of that was still pretty mid-American kind of, of eating, and it was more in a, not, not diner but, what's the word I'm looking for? Basically, you didn't come up and just serve.

Zahaba: Mess. Family style?

Benson: Family style kind of thing. Yeah.

Zahaba: And probably the light, canned lagers were the beverage of choice.

Benson: There wasn't, well, most of these were university students, so, technically they were probably underage.

[Laughter]

05:16 Benson: I do remember there would be, like at the end of a couple of, there'd be conventions there, there'd be like, like a kegger basically. And so, in the AV hall there would be, they would have a keg out, and it would be like a mid-af-, summer afternoon kind of thing. And I just remember college students and my dad and my mom hanging out there and you know, just kinda running around. But there wasn't a lot of, there wasn't a lot of beer really involved in my, in my childhood or around me other than, you know, big macro lagers, but that's in the seventies. That's probably just about all there was.

McCulla: So, could you each describe a bit your path to brewing? What, what was your career like before brewing and what led you to beer ultimately?

5:55 Zahaba: Well, for me, what led me to beer is Brad. For sure. So, we have been together for twenty-four years now? Brad had, he'll speak to his own, the beer epiphany that he had in college, but for me college was a time of sort of choking down, like, whatever was in the keg. And not really understanding, you know, the, the enjoyment of it. But, Brad and I started dating a few years out of college and by that time he was already very passionate about the craft beer scene that

was happening here in Seattle. Breweries like Redhook, and then of course Deschutes down in Portland. And so, really for me our relationship was built over craft beer. Like if those were, all of our dates were pub lunches, pub dinners. And so, you know.

Benson: But the dinners, the dinners were out with a good bottle of wine, though. I handled the lunches.

Zahaba: I mean, we have, we have room for all of the beverages in our life, for sure.

[Chuckles]

06:54 Zahaba: Yeah, and at that time my, I was getting into the wine industry. But, really, but really it was, you know I just remember that in our early dating, like, all of the beer that we were drinking. And then in 1997, let's see, in 1995, I think I had started selling Italian wine in Seattle, and two years after that I had the opportunity to move to the east coast, to the New York area, to represent Italian wines, and to move into more of like a marketing and public relations and educational side of the industry. And we moved out there together, and we were lamenting, like, we got there and the east coast was still so steeped in more of the traditional styles of beer. And we were really missing our, our west coast favorites. So, it was Sierra Nevada that got us through the early years in New York. Especially since you could have it delivered to your fifth-floor walk-up.

[Laughter]

07:49 Zahaba: But, so, it was while we were out there, I mean, of course throughout our entire relationship, Brad had been doing some homebrewing. And we have, you know, lots of really funny stories of misadventures in that realm. But when we were out, when we were living in Hoboken, New Jersey, Brad had a lot more free time in his own professional life. And, Maxwell's, the fairly well-known music venue, was a block away from our apartment and they were converting it to a brewpub at the time. And so, I feel like I encouraged Brad to walk through those doors and to see if he could help them out. And he did. And he was able to start brewing there. And then the head brewer at the time, Kenny Ribbenakar, took Brad with him to another New Jersey brewery, High Point Wheat Beer Company, which is where he learned how to make the German styles that you tasted downstairs. And, and then onward to a few other locations while we were out there, too. So.

McCulla: And what years were?

08:52 Zahaba: That was, so we arrived in New York in 1997, and we came home to Seattle in 2003. And, when we came home to Seattle, I had left the Italian wine side of things and was now working for an Australian wine importer. And Brad

had returned to the environmental laboratory, forensic chemistry, where he had been prior to our departure for New York. And, you know, we just resumed sort of our west coast lifestyle. We continued to drink the beer, the wine, all of our favorite beverages. We got married. We started our family. And it, when it was, it was a few years after that, probably about five or six years ago now that, you know, he, Brad was feeling really unsatisfied in his career, we had small children, we had, you know, all of the normal kinds of stresses in our lives and we just stopped and asked ourselves why we weren't doing something that we really love. I was actually surprised that he had willingly left brewing at the time that we left the east coast. Or that he didn't want to just step right into that here when we returned to Seattle. But, it was a few years after, a few years later when we were like, "Yeah, why aren't we doing this?" and just really questioned, you know, what we wanted out of our day to day lives, and decided to make the, the plunge.

10:14 McCulla: So, when you, quick question, when you were living in the east and talked about missing the beers of the, of the west, the Pacific northwest, what, what was the character of the beer that the you were missing? What?

Zahaba: Well, at that time, it probably was a lot about the rich porters. I don't know if, I don't think I can say that at that time it was really the IPAs. But I'll say, but definitely some of the bright hop flavors of what we would have had in a Northwest-style pale.

Benson: I think there's a lot of influence on the east coast brewers from Europe.

Zahaba: Yeah.

Benson: Especially in this time. So, they were really emulating, like, an English IPA. And the Northwest was at that point was already developing kind of their own, which was a lot leaner malt, malt bills, not as much sweetness. Like, that whole balance, the hop, balance, the hop. Well, I think the Pacific northwest, they're like, show the hop. Show the hop more. Like, take, take the sweetness out. Make the body a little bit, I want to say, thin but just, a se-, a secondary note to the hops versus an English IPA, you would have maltiness and hoppiness kind of combined in a balance. But it was, they were, for me they were too malty.

Zahaba: Right. I would, I would agree with that. And then things were, hadn't really, and the new wave of brewing hadn't yet hit the east coast. So then, when you were finding it, you weren't necessarily finding the best examples. Whereas I think at the time, I'm scaring myself.

[Laughter]

Zahaba: Saying this out loud. I don't wanna upset anyone that would feel differently, but at the time, at that time in the whole craft beer movement, I just think the west coast was a little bit further along in the quality of that style of

beer. And I've also, the other thing I should say, though, to be fair, is that I am a dedicated ale girl, and so, like all of the wonderful lager types and Pilsner types in the European style that were readily available to me in New York just weren't my cup of tea. So, there's that too.

[Chuckles]

12:15 McCulla: So, and so your path [Benson] to brewing from your perspective, you began as a homebrewer, is that right?

Benson: Yeah. I got a degree in chemistry from Gonzaga. And, on a summer, basically a summer biking tour around the San Juan Islands, we were just wet as all could be, it'd been raining on us for three days, and we pulled into, I think it was Rosario, little resort there. And we went in and there was this new beer I'd never seen before, and it was Redhook ESB, actually. And so, I mean I kid you not, we opened it up, we were out on this, on the pier basically, and the clouds kind of opened up, and the sun started shining on us, and of course steam started coming off us 'cause we were so wet. And, I was sitting there drinking with my friends, and we just took one sip of it, and everyone was like, "What?" Like, it stopped us. Instead of just like in college, yep, you got a beer in your hand and you're just drinking beer, but you're not, you don't wanna taste it, right? This was just something, it was basically, you know, it was, it was my beer epiphany. And being a scientist, I always wonder like, well, how do they do that? Why is this different? I want to break it down. And I think that's, that's how I started becoming a homebrewer. So, I just started reading, I'm like, well, it's not that hard. It's the enzymatic reactions to break down starch and sugar. And you got isomerization reactions to get the hop compounds to be soluble. And you got aroma compounds like, this, you know. And you got this organism you have to kind of make happy. Like, that all makes sense. So, just kind of started, started homebrewing, and was doing that a lot here in Seattle when Lara drug me to the east coast.

[Chuckles]

Benson: But.

Zahaba: Against his will.

Benson: Yeah.

Zahaba: For sure.

13:41 Benson: But, but yeah. I mean, did, I was doing environmental consulting and walked in to the neighbor, neighboring brew pub and just kind of said I, I'm a homebrewer, I have a degree in chemistry and I'll work for free. And about five

years later we came back and I'd gone through, I think, four breweries. So, Maxwell's, High Point Wheat Beer Company.

Zahaba: Heartland.

Benson: Heartland, in Manhattan. And then, back to High Point. And then, a gentleman got out of brewing school, Rick Reid, and he was actually interning with High Point. And he was in his probably fifties at that point. And I was looking at him like, "What are you doing washing kegs? Like, you know. This, this is the job for a twenty-five-year old. You're gonna, you're gonna burn yourself out." And he just confided in me one day, he's like, "I just got out of brewing school and I wanna open a brewery and so I'm trying to learn." And he's like, "Will you come help me?" And so, I came over to Crooked Hill Brewing Company then, and helped formulate recipes and help set up some of the brewing equipment and the bottling line and get things basically up and running. And then, and then luckily.

Zahaba: It was.

Benson: We moved back to Seattle.

[Laughter]

Zahaba: It was time to come home.

Benson: Yeah. But.

Zahaba: Literally in a day, it was like, "We're done."

[Chuckles]

Benson: But, yeah, I did, I mean, this is the first. When we got back here, 2002, right?

Zahaba: Three.

Benson: Three.

Zahaba: October 2003.

15:00 Benson: I mean the first, the first crash brewi-, craft brewing crash had kind of happened at that point. So, there were a lot of, closures were happening. I was working really hard for really low amount of money and, so that was part of my decision not to come back to Seattle and just jump into, you know, come to a local brewery and do the same thing. Right? If like, hard work, low pay. And I was talking to Lara, I was like, we'd have to, we'd have to be the owners to open a

brewery. And that's, like, the hurdle, it's pretty host-, cost-prohibitive. And I kind of tabled it for a while. And then I had a little small mid-life crisis, and Lara said, "You're miserable. We gotta do something else." And we sat down that night and started writing a business plan.

Zahaba: Our test name, our initial name for the brewery was Critical Juncture Brewing Company. But as we ran that one by all of our friends, they did suggest that maybe we should just call it Midlife Crisis Brewing.

[Laughter]

Benson: Yeah, maybe that's not the most marketable name.

Zahaba: So, we had to go back to the drawing board on that one.

McCulla: I feel like several breweries might, might be named that.

Benson: Yeah.

[Laughter]

McCulla: Well, and so, and so what does Stoup refer to?

16:00 Zahaba: Stoup is an old English word that literally means tankard or a vessel for beer. So, it sort of harkens back to the day when you might walk into the pub with your own mug. And you might ask the barkeep to fill your stoup with ale. So, that was the inspiration. We also found, though, like, an old Norse meaning that suggested it was a beaker, which certainly resonated with us because of the scientific backgrounds of both Brad and Robin. And then it's also, you can, that's also a font of holy water, so we liked the idea of blessing yourself from the stoup.

[Chuckles]

16:39 McCulla: And I wanted to ask a bit about the, the influence of science. How would you, how do you feel studying science makes you a better brewer or a different kind of brewer than somebody who hasn't studied science?

Benson: I mean, I wouldn't see, I wouldn't say better. I mean, there's, I think there's different ways to approach the process, and there's a lot of art involved. But, the underlying, I mean, obviously people were, were brewing beer before there were microscopes or thermometers or anything else like that. So, it's been done for a long time. But I, I think knowing the process and how it works, one, helps you to really sit back and just design something in your head or on a piece of paper, versus trial and error in the brewhouse, which is kind of an expensive way to brew. But also, if you have a problem, or something happens in the brewery, to be able to go back, you've taken measurements, you kind of follow a

bit of scientific method and you have a notebook and you can record everything and you can go back and like, why is this gravity a little higher, this a little lower? You can actually go back and find out. Like, oh, the temperature was a little off, or the pH was a little low, and maybe the enzymes didn't sacrifice the starch as well as they did, and go back and try to fix that and, you know, rewrite the SOP, and change it just so you can get more uniform.

McCulla: Right.

Benson: Beer. 'Cause, I think when I first started brewing, inconsistency in the craft market was expected. Like, you walk into a brewpub and the house pale ale was gonna taste different every time. And that, I think there was a little bit of charm about that back then, but that's not the case anymore. Like, you have to come out of the gate, the beer has to be solid, and it has to be consistent. And if there's a change, good. You better have done it on purpose. Not just by accident.

18:19 McCulla: That makes sense. Definitely. And, and, another question. You've obviously worked in several different kinds of breweries, or different scales of operations and how did your experience in a variety of different kinds of settings impact how you, your plans for Stoup?

Benson: Yeah, I mean that's. I sometimes, and this might not be fair to some of my former bosses, but some, some of the times I learned what not to do in the process. One thing that I really decided here when running the brewery was, if we need the piece of equipment, let's get it. Because the losses on either a beer not wor-, turning out right because temperature control's not on or you don't have a measuring device or something like that is, or the labor involved in not having enough hoses to do two things at once, really causes a problem. But I also think that I learned a lot about production and how to organize a day in a brewery. Like, what do you do first? Can you do two things at once? Like, at Heartland, a lot of beer was made by two people. And it was, you were always doing two things. You were filtering while you were doughing-in, you were cleaning a tank while you were doing something else. And that really taught me how much you can really get done in a brewery in one day. But also working some packaging lines probably influenced us not packaging at this point. Just, how labor-intensive it is. How capital-intensive it is to get a packaging line up and running. I think that's changed a lot now with all the mobile lines that are out there. You really don't have to invest a couple hundred thousand dollars in a canning or bottling line. Someone else has bought it and they're just gonna charge you a fee to come in and do you that service. But also, just, stability of the product and the way that the consumer ends up getting the end product. Doing draft right now is, we can really keep an eye on it. Not to say that we won't ever do packaging, but it's, it's another, it's another leap and I always think of like, a six-pack of beer. If you didn't do it right, it's just a little, there are six little time bombs sitting on a shelf somewhere that, it's gonna be the first time a consumer tastes your beer and they taste it and they're like, "This, this is horrible." And, now you gotta win that

person back. And they're not gonna, they're not gonna just buy a six-pack again. Somehow you gotta convince them to take another chance with your brand.

20:36 Zahaba: I think I feel, like, I remember you speaking specifically also to how your experience influenced scale. Our decision to open with a fifteen-barrel brewhouse, which seemed like, to a lot of people seemed like going big for a new brewer, or at least in the Seattle market, an unknown brewer, our decision not to open as a nano or a tiny brewery, 'cause you understood production, and.

Benson: Yeah, I mean.

Zahaba: The economics of that as well.

Benson: You can spend five hours in the brewhouse and make fifteen gallons of beer or four hundred and sixty. Let's, let's make four hundred and sixty gallons of beer.

21:16 McCulla: And, so still, thinking about the formation of Stoup, I wanted to ask about your [Zahaba], your move from the wine industry into beer and, you know, what relationship did you see between wine making and brewing, if any?

Zahaba: Oh, I definitely, I definitely see a lot. You know, and of course the beer was important to me all along the way and I actually maintained my wine career for as long as I could when we first opened.

[Laughter]

Zahaba: I was trying to, trying to do it all and it, at a certain point I just had to make the lifestyle choice of, like, being family and family business. But, you know, I've spent my career visiting wineries and seeing that in action. One of the key differences is of course the ability, your ability to produce beer year-round versus having one annual harvest of grapes and producing your entire year's worth from that one annual harvest. So, that's a significant, significant difference in the two industries. But I would say the industries are almost growing, growing together a little bit because now that we're seeing all of this fun experimentation with barrels, a lot of it is, you know, distillate barrels, but you're starting to see more and more wine barrels coming into breweries, which is something that we'd like to play with too, or even some wine must going into your beer fermentation. And for me, in my mind, when I think about the two and, you know, me being the, the one of the three of us that is not a scientist, so I don't necessarily have these automatic understandings of the processes, but the parallels that I'm always able to draw I think about, like, I like to think about the hops, and I can relate to the hops in the way I relate to grapes because it's, it's the, it's not the only ingredient, 'cause malt certainly, malt and how malt is roasted plays a huge factor, too, but at least in my mind when I think about the hops, the hop harvest, and how the different hop varieties affect the flavor profile of the beer and the mouth feel

of the beer, which is so relevant for how the various varieties of grapes will affect the ultimate wine. But, again, but perhaps the most important elements of it for me are just all of the social happiness that occurs over a pint of beer, or over a glass of wine. How the right wine marries so perfectly with a meal. It's all about the, the enjoyment.

[Chuckles]

Benson: It's always.

Zahaba: For me.

23:48 Benson: It's always something we've always talked about too, is like, wine works so well with dinner. I mean, food works very well with, with, with food-, beer works very well with food, also. But, beer seems to be more of that social drink to where you're sitting down, maybe without food, maybe it's just the after work pint with your friend, that you don't really see that as much with wine. Like wine, wine in my opinion really, unless it's champagne, needs food. Like, you really need to have something to come to balance the acidity and anything like that. And beer kind of spans that, the whole gamut, like.

Zahaba: Beer *is* food.

Benson: It works really well with food. Beer is food.

[Chuckles]

Benson: But it's also is that it is, you know, a social lubricant.

Zahaba: Mmhmm.

Benson: It's, you know, I mean it's kept, it's a big part of a lot of societies too, like.

24:36 Zahaba: But I guess, to, another way to answer that question would also be, like, as far as Stoup Brewing is concerned, maybe the most relevant elements of my experience in wine are, you know, the marketing. I was working in the marketing, the PR, the educational side of things for twenty years in that industry, so that is what really differentiates the role that I have here at Stoup from the roles that Brad and Robin have. And that's been a lot of fun for me to do it for my own brand, versus someone else's brand. And it's, it's really great to get personal with it. And to run with our own aesthetic sensibilities and, social media has been the newest arena for me that hadn't taken off as much as it has since I've left the wine industry. And I have more of a direct-to-consumer, whereas I was always on the import side of things which means you're separated from the, the wine consumer, you know. We imported it into the country. We sold it to distributors around the

country. We helped those distributors sell it to the retailers and the restaurateurs, and they sold it to the, the drinker. So, I had a lot of separation in there whereas now, here I am, I'm standing behind my own bar and I'm serving our customers and interacting with them directly. And coming up with the creative, fun ways to put us out there on the market, and playing around with all of our merchandise, and all of those things.

26:02

McCulla: And so, how would you describe the Stoup brand and what kinds of messages do you try to convey to consumers?

Zahaba: Hmmm.

[Laughter]

Zahaba: Branding questions.

Benson: Well I think one thing we always, we always say, you know, we're not, we're not saving lives here. I mean, we're making beer. I mean, we're very serious about it and we want to do it right. But really, at the end of the day this is really about promoting happiness and some social connectivity to your neighborhood and things like that.

Zahaba: Yeah. It's, and like, and the way we always described the beers that we're making, it's like, beers we want to drink and beers we hope you want to drink, too. We've all had the experience where we're sitting, like we're, we're just in the taproom and you can see someone as they're taking a sip of their beer, and then they might pause 'cause they're, they're in conversation, but then they're sip their beer, but then they kind of pause, and you can tell that they're having a thought about the beer, and they'll go back for another sip. And it's just so satisfying for us to see that interaction. So, really that kind of sense of community. The return. We have so many local regular customers that come in for the experience of the beer, but also come in for the experience with our staff. We're trying to create a very warm, welcoming environment. Quality is important, but, quality of the beverage of course, but also quality of our space. One of the things, when we did the build-out, so, four and a half years ago now, we were conscientiously trying to create a different kind of space than what we were finding in taprooms at that time. It seemed like it was always okay to just sort of walk in to an empty space, sit on the keg, toss your peanut shells on the floor. And, I didn't, that's not what I wanted for my own space. Aesthetics are important to me. And I wanted a space where people would feel comfortable and want to linger. And so, we definitely went, you know, with design. And, I actually remember feeling a little self-conscious about it at the time, like, people would think like, "Who are these fancy people?" Even though you can't really call all the stainless steel and wood fancy. In comparison it felt that way at that time, but. But people, that is one of the comments we get is that people really do love, love the space, and so that was.

28:23 McCulla: And can you describe a bit, what, what does the space look like around us, if you walk outside or inside?

Zahaba: Well, as you approach the brewery you might walk in and you'll see, the first thing you would see is our back bar. Or my, the first thing you might actually see is the bar, which is a beautiful piece of salvaged walnut slab. So that was turned into our bar top. So, it's warm and it's inviting and then beyond that you have this really vibrant pop of color, 'cause we've used a refrigerated shipping container to house the kegs that we're serving and the taps come right through the back of the keg. So, that's probably the most common picture of Stoup Brewing that you'll, you'll see. And then, but the brewery is very accessible to the taproom, so you're looking out over all of the stainless steel tanks. And that's why we wanted to use a lot of wood accents in the taproom itself, to sort of balance the coldness of stainless steel. I think the poster wall is one of the other fun elements of the brewery. It's so bright. Lots of colors. It's a living wall because people are adding stickers to it all the time, which is really great.

Benson: We can also see what visiting breweries came in, if we weren't here on a Saturday. You're like, "Oh, those guys were in? Ah-."

[Laughter]

29:32 Zahaba: It's true. Yeah, a lot of the breweries' stickers are really great. And then our outdoor beer garden, you know, it's, we're surrounded by cement, more steel, it's kind of a concrete, we're on a very industrial street. It's residential one-way, which is really fun for us 'cause people can walk on in and there's a park, but then if you go the other way it's entirely industry, so we wanted to create a softer space with lots of bamboo and the bright colors of comfortable Adirondack chairs and more shipping containers where we're, you know, an outdoor service bar served out of another shipping container. So, it's very in-, very industrial but, but in a little bit of a stylized way, I guess is how I would describe it.

30:17 McCulla: And, referencing the shipping containers, could you also speak for the benefit of the interview to the history of the neighborhood again, as you mentioned earlier?

Zahaba: You wanna take that, Brad?

Benson: Yeah.

[Chuckles]

Benson: Ballard is a, was basically founded by Scandinavians. And so, it's a, it's a center for, for fishing here. There's a Sea-, the Alaskan fishing fleet is housed here in, in Ballard. And there's just a lot of maritime industry here, so, still people

that are building nets and fixing boats and dry docks and fish and, you know, big plastic fish totes for the, for the fishing industry. So, it definitely, it still keeps a degree of that kind of maritime feel in the neighborhood. And because of that, it's zoned industrial, which is great for a brewery, 'cause we need to be in an industrial place unless, unless you're a brewpub, then you can get away with kind of a more residential area. But yeah, so it kinda, we didn't wanna be different than the neighborhood. Like, we also wanted to integrate part of the industrial feel of where we're actually at.

31:22 McCulla: And I was also intrigued by your mention earlier of just, your research of historical brewing styles, especially European styles. And could you describe how you do that?

Benson: I mean, a lot of that happens through the Brewer's Association has done a lot, a good job of, of author-, have different authors writing books specific to style. But there's, there's a lot of history out there in the brewing industry. And so, usually that, that's the way I approach a new beer that I haven't brewed before, is I just kind of go research the history of the style. Which is, which is great, 'cause I mean you learn, you learn, like, European politics in the, you know, sixteenth century. This duke made this law which forced the people in Edinbur-, or in Einbeck to brew beer this way. And the duke stole a brewer from here to come brew the same beer there, like. Like, the politics involved in, I mean, in the brewing industry is, just, really amazing. But also, there's, there's a reason styles grew up in different areas, I mean, it had to do with, with, with first the water that they had, and then what, what ingredients they could get in that, in that area. So, you'll, you'll find, you'll find hoppier beers in hop-growing regions, but if you go up to Scotland, they're maltier beers because all the hops are grown in England and the Scots don't want to use English hops. So, you have all these bigger, maltier Scotch-style ales, but then you get further south and you might have, you know, English-style pale ales, or beers that are more, you know, hop, hop-forward.

32:53 McCulla: And what, what would you say inspired you to try a new style? Is it the kind of interest in history or the, the flavors of a particular style?

Benson: Yeah, I mean, it's all different reasons. Sometimes it's to kind of fill out our, what we're brewing. Like, we'll look and go, "Wow, we just brewed a bunch of IPAs. Maybe we should do a malty beer. Maybe we should be. I mean, let's do, let's do a bock. It's malt-forward, but it's winter so it's a little higher alcohol, a little more warming, or, you know, it's summer, let's do a, you know, let's do a German-style wheat beer. Something like that." But then other times it's just, you know, grabbing something from, you know, out of a book and reading through it and like, "Oh, that's an interesting technique or an interesting style that I haven't really, haven't brewed before." And then kind of dig into it that way.

33:37 McCulla: And so, when you set out to design a new kind of recipe, what is the creative process like? How, where do you begin?

Benson: Oh, I always begin with the history. I always read, find out what I can about why this beer style was developed in the one area. What ingredients were, were available. And then there's usually a modern interpretation of it, too. Like, how has it changed? And the U.S. crafts, craft brewing industry really has fun with tweaking styles. I mean, we're somewhat traditionalists in what we do, not to say that we don't, you know, do things a little out of the ordinary sometimes, but to really go in and see what the history was—and a lot of times they were forced to brew it that way because that's just the ingredients they had, whatever—and then what the modern interpretations are. And from there, once we get an idea, you kinda know, well I want, I want the bitterness to be in this level, I want the color to be in this level. Do I want, you know, malt-forward aroma or hop-forward aroma? Do I want it to be noble hops, or do we want it to be new modern hops? Or do we want an old style, you know, let's say like a German-style pilsner, but we're gonna use a more modern hop and have a different twist on that noble hop character. So, just kind of start building a picture on paper of what we want it to look like. And then, then selecting the ingredients. And then I'll go out in the grain room and kind of just munch on different bags of grain and think, you know, what do we want to, you know, I might have a basis of, should be about this much crystal malt and this much Munich and this much of these different malts, but then actually go out there and munch on some grain and think about it and maybe cut this back a little bit. Move this one up.

35:14 McCulla: So, how would you both describe your, your kind of position within the Seattle beer world? When you, when you think of yourselves within a community of brewers, how are you unique?

Benson: I, I think we're both still kind of blown away that, that we did-, that we did it.

Zahaba: That we are in a community of breweries.

Benson: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Benson: That we're here after four years. I mean, the community itself is, especially in Seattle, is just so welcoming and so, so open. Like, we've gotten, you know, help, advice, you know, things from other breweries. You know, there's, there's really a collaborative feel to the industry here. I mean, I kind of, kind of the, you know, the rising tide floats all, rises all boats.

Zahaba: Yep.

Benson: Kind of a thing, I mean, obviously we're out there in the market trying to get people to drink our beer. But it's, I don't know, I wanna say, I'm gonna, I feel pretty, I mean, pretty humbled by the response that people have had to our beer. I mean I, we originally kind of, like, said we brew beer we like to drink, we kind of brewed it for us. And luckily other people like it, so we can make more and keep doing what we're doing. What do you think?

Zahaba: Yeah, and I think, I think sometimes we like, you know, beer of the people, like our, our beers are available, we try to make them as available as possible. Our taproom is open and welcoming to all. I don't, those aren't necessarily things that set us apart from, from the other breweries in the community. I think our location is rather special. Like, being able to be in this neighborhood of Ballard where you have ten other breweries within walking distance. And so, one of the unexpected things that we have found ourselves to be is a tourist destination, because beer lovers that are visiting Seattle will often choose to come to Ballard simply for all of the breweries that they can hit in an afternoon, and so it's, feels really special to be a part of that kind of interest and excitement.

37:24 Benson: Yeah, I mean we do get a lot of, a lot of tourists, a lot of people are traveling. Like, we had a proposal last Saturday.

Zahaba: Yes.

Benson: At the taproom.

Zahaba: Oh yeah, those are always the happy moments, too, yeah. Proposals. People come and do their engagement photos.

[Laughter]

Zahaba: Yup. And this, the, the actual space that we are sitting in right now is above our taproom. And this is our, the newest addition. We built it out as a space that we could use for private events, because we would get those kinds of requests all the time. People, beer lovers, yeah, they wanna do all of their special things in a brewery. So, yeah, we were always having so many requests that we couldn't honor because we didn't have the space. And so, we built this room as a private event space. And we've had rehearsal dinners, small wedding receptions.

Benson: Anniversaries. Birthdays.

Zahaba: Yeah. Anniversary dinners.

Benson: Graduation, graduate school graduation parties.

Zahaba: Yep. Yep. Yep. Yep. So, yeah, just being a place where people want to gather and celebrate the important moments of their lives. It sounds really cliché, like it should be on a Hallmark card, but it's really satisfying to us.

38:29 McCulla: That, that's fantastic. And what, what do you hear from consumers about, what do they want in terms of the beer in addition to the space? What are they asking for? What do they like when they come in?

Benson: I mean, diversity is a big thing, I think. People really wanna come in and be able to have a lot of different styles to choose from. So, we do, we do taster glasses. Some taster trays that we had made that hold six. And it's, I like it because it's, you can almost tell the difference between a regular and someone that hasn't been to the brewery before, 'cause the regulars know their pint of beer they want. They go sit down. But the new people are always getting a taster tray. And just to see them and the diversity of beers that they can choose if we've done it right. You know, it's a German, some German-style beers, some barrel-aged things, sour beers, some hoppy beers, a porter, stouts, whatever it is that we kind of have on the board. We, like we said, we do kind of brew what we want to, what we want to drink, so, we don't have a seasonal, standard seasonal rotation. Where, on August first, this beer comes out. We just kind of, I mean we did a Kolsch in the fall, which most people were like, "Well, why won't you do that in the spring when it's gettin' warm?" We're like, "Well, 'cause we had some tank space, so we decided to brew a Kolsch."

[Laughter]

Benson: But I think, I think consumers really do, I mean, quality, obviously. The beers have to be good. But, diversity is, is something that I think the craft beer consumer's really looking for.

39:58 McCulla: And just, just a couple questions to finish. You've, we've talked about the, the brewing culture of the Pacific northwest, and Seattle in particular. How would you, what distinguishes that from the larger American brewing culture, would you say?

Benson: I mean, I think if you look at the, brewing overall, including the large, you know, international brewers, obviously they're, they're publicly traded companies, and they have to answer to the shareholders and they have to turn a profit regardless. And I, I think you don't see that as much in the smaller craft brewing industry. I mean, obviously people wanna put food on the table and pay their rent and maybe save a little for retirement, but a lot of it is really a labor of love. Like, a lot of the craft breweries that are open, and people are running or working in them are there because they really, one, they like the industry of craft beer. But, also, they like, they, they like the community. Like, again, it's very collaborative. People are, like what they do and it's infectious when you're

around people that enjoy what, what they're doing. I think that's a big, a big difference.

41:08 Zahaba: Speaking to the beer, like, I mean, the most distinguishable difference is hops. Like, just the Pacific northwest use of hops. And then right now, we're in this interesting, like, in this moment in time you can so directly distinguish this because there's this trend of these New England IPAs or hazy IPAs, so it's almost, it is kind of interesting how you can see that style springing up. And it's so different from the style that is sort of born and true to the Pacific northwest. So, very specific differences there, but now you're starting to see them mix in as, you know, consumers kind of demand that style from the Pacific north breweries as well. Or are curious, and you have a lot of us out here experimenting with it.

41:56 McCulla: And what do you see for the future of American beer, do you think? Five years out, ten years out?

Benson: I think you're gonna see a lot more craft lagers. I think, and I think that is, that is because the technical proficiency that's happening in the craft brewing, they're difficult to make. And so, and, and, pretty cost-intensive to have the cellars built out, 'cause it takes a lot longer to make them. But I think, I think there's gonna, you're gonna see a lot of more craft lagers, which I think, I think will help bring that macro, you know, consumer into more of the craft arena, too.

Zahaba: And then we're seeing the pendulum swing back from super intensity at the IPA level, like, as much bitter, as much hop, as much alcohol as you get, it's swinging back to balance. Which is nice.

Benson: Yep.

Zahaba: We're always in favor of balance.

[Chuckles]

Benson: Wanna be able to go back to that pint and have a second sip. Like.

Zahaba: Yeah.

Benson: Having that glass of beer where you have a sip and you're like, it's just a complete assault, assault on your senses. It may be kind of cool. You're like, "Wow, how do they do that?" But then you're like, "But, I don't wanna, I don't wanna drink sixteen ounces of it."

[Chuckles]

43:10 McCulla: Alright. And then, one, one, this is a big question to finish with, but you know the museum, of course we, we work with objects. And, you know, we tell

stories through objects, and so, I like to ask people always when I visit, if you could think of an object that kind of epitomizes your story, your career, what might that be?

Zahaba: Not necessarily an object here or?

McCulla: No, it could be anything.

Zahaba: Or an object in the?

McCulla: No. It could be anything. No, anything.

Zahaba: An object that epitomizes the story of your career.

McCulla: Or your personal history. Your journey to.

Benson: Mine would be a microscope.

McCulla: Okay.

Benson: I got one as a child, when I was young and I still have it. Emory has it. My eight-year old son, now.

Zahaba: Yeah. That's a good answer.

Benson: Thank you.

[Laughter]

Zahaba: I don't feel like I have that, how do I distill, like, maybe my, maybe my passport. Yeah, the adventures I've been able to have that have left me with a real love of all things culinary and beverage-related.

McCulla: That's a great answer. Alright, well thank you so much for your time. It's just been a pleasure to visit and to learn more about your stories.

Zahaba: Thank you.

McCulla: Thank you.

Zahaba: This was fun.