Name of Interviewee: Steve Dresler
Date of Interview: March 29, 2017
Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla, Paula Johnson
Length of Interview: 33:58 minutes

00:00:00 Theresa McCulla: Okay, so, it is still March 29th, 2017.

[Laughter]

Steve Dresler: Yes, it is.

McCulla: This is Theresa McCulla. I am here with Paula Johnson of the National Museum of American History, and we are interviewing Steve Dresler, brew master of Sierra Nevada Brewing Company. We're meeting at the brewery in Chico, California, and this interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative. So, Steve, let's begin at the beginning, please. Where and when were you born?

Dresler: Oh, so, start over. Yes, Watertown, Wisconsin. January 25th, 1957.

McCulla: Great, and who were your parents?

Dresler: Don and Betty Dresler. Both deceased.

McCulla: Where did you grow up?

00:00:38 Dresler: I spent my first three years in Wisconsin, and then we moved to California in 1960. And I lived in, my father became a state park, California State Park worker, and did that for his career, so we lived in the California, in the Sacramento Delta, for the first part of his career outside of the town of Isleton. And then we moved from there to another park, outside of Calistoga, California, where I graduated from high school in 1975. Went to college in Southern California for three years, and then moved here with my lady-friend now wife, Kathy, in 1979. Graduated from college in 1981 with degrees in Biology and Chemistry, and started working here at Sierra Nevada in January of 1983.

McCulla: Great. And.

00:01:37 Dresler: And homebrewing back then was quite rough, compared to what it is now, because Ken Grossman had started a homebrew store here in Chico. He still owned it at the beginning of my homebrewing career, probably in 1979, '80, but then sold it shortly after that to get part of his investment capital, start the brewery. So, I was homebrewing, and then I was working actually later at that homebrew shop, selling over the counter, in between jobs, and I heard, my wife actually heard through some people that they were looking for part-time workers at the brewery. So, I went in and wrote down all my particulars on one of those

three by five sticky pads, and I got called the next day and I was offered an opportunity to put bottles into boxes for four dollars an hour under the table.

McCulla: I want to ask you a couple more questions about your homebrewing experience.

Dresler: Yeah.

00:02:39 McCulla: I mean, what made you want to brew beer? I mean, what?

Dresler: We were poor.

McCulla: You were poor.

[Laughter]

Dresler: And we wanted, we wanted to make beer. And my friends and I, we were all science majors, and so we were intrigued by specs of fermentation. And, you know, it was an interesting hobby. I have no doubt whatsoever that we made phenomenally crappy beer, in hindsight. And it was something that I did until I got my job here and then there was really no reason to do that anymore.

McCulla: What kinds of styles were you brewing?

Dresler: You know, mainly ales because it was very primitive. You know, I didn't have any ferm-, refrigeration type set-up and, you know, so it was just fermenting in my kitchen so you were dependent on ambient temperatures, and, so mainly ales. And we did a lot of dark beer because they were a little more robust in their flavor profiles so they were more forgiving.

00:03:39 McCulla: Okay. Alright. How did you and other homebrewers learn to brew at the time?

Dresler: There were a few books, you know, there was some information. You know this is of course pre-internet, so it was all print media. And, so, there were books available at the homebrew shop, and so mainly through that. And you could buy kits that would have instructions with them as well.

McCulla: Okay. Alright. What was the most challenging aspect of brewing to learn at the early stage, would you say?

Dresler: Oh, the homebrewing?

McCulla: Yeah. Yeah.

00:04:13 Dresler: You know, we had, we had a limited, if any, sense of respect for microbiological sanitation, and so that's why I'm saying that we probably, we did make really bad beer. I remember the first time I actually met Ken, I was invited to give a, serve my stout at a homebrew club meeting. And this was after Ken had sold the shop. And I'm not, I was never really a club kind of person, so I wasn't a member of the homebrew club. And so, I said sure, you know, I'll come down. And so, I brought some of my stouts. And Ken was there, 'cause that's what this guy Bill had said, well Ken will, Ken Grossman will be there. So, I said okay, and I brought my stout and I was serving it around. And somebody asked Ken, well what do you think about the beer? And he said, well, it'd be pretty good if it weren't infected.

McCulla: Oh.

[Laughter]

Dresler: And I said, okay, you know. And then, and then he graciously told me that I had lactic problems in my beer, and, yeah. So that was our first interaction. I don't know that he remembers that, but I certainly do, 'cause I was the maker of the beer.

00:05:26 McCulla: Now could you describe the early days at Sierra Nevada. What was a day in the life like then?

Dresler: It was a little bit of everything. When I came on I was part-time, and when I finally got on the payroll, quote, un-quote, I think there were five of us besides Ken and his partner Paul. And we were doing five and seven-barrel batches. You know, you know it, for the time, primitive equipment and everything that we had back then was used dairy, so it was very sanitary from a sanitation, excuse me, from a stainless point of view, because dairy is very critical. But it was, it was definitely a struggle. It was incredibly fun, I mean, the diversification of what you got to do at the brewery at that size, you know. I brewed, I cellared, we worked on the packaging line, you worked in the lab. You know, you just did whatever necessitated to get the work done. Very, very intriguing group of individuals, as you might imagine. Very much fringe people, myself included. But there was always, there was a real vision there, and a real, very high standard for quality. And here we had a respect for microbiological integrity. It was such a,
00:07:00 there was no craft industry, so to speak. New Albion had already gone out of business. There was Anchor Steam in the Bay. We were before all the breweries opening up in the Pacific Northwest, and so it was, it was really being on a frontier, it was really quite exciting. And the flavor profiles were so foreign to anything that you could get. You know, if you were gonna drink big back in the early eighties you would get imported lager as opposed to domestic lager. Our raw materials were very limited, so there was just not nearly the level of resource. And, you know, having successes with making new beers, or getting some sales out in the market, you know, everything was new and exciting, you know, it was

in its infancy. And so, it was a real pleasure to be able to take a part in that. It's something I will never forget.

00:08:02 McCulla: So, would you say from the start you were aware of being at the beginning of a kind of movement?

Dresler: No.

McCulla: No.

Dresler: Well I was trying to buy a car. I mean, it was, it was, there was not, you know, and as Ken I'm sure will say, you know, there was, there was not a lot of money in it at the time. And his, his motivation, and ours as well, was not to get rich, you know, it was, you know, it was to be creative and passionate about something that you're doing. It happened to become financially successful for us, but that was never, you know, never in the thought process. And, you know, in looking back on it sometimes I don't hardly remember what the thought process was, you know, because we were just caught up in doing what we were doing. And I was, I felt fortunate to have a job, and I still do until I retire, but I've never, it's amazing to do something for as long as I have that you thoroughly enjoy. I mean, that's worth more than the money part. You know, we all have to work in some aspect or another, but to love what you do is truly, it's an amazing thing. I don't know a lot of people that have been that fortunate other than some of my brewer friends. So, yeah.

00:09:15 McCulla: So, what does a brew master do?

Dresler: Well, his, the brew master's job has changed a lot over the years. The brew master used to come in and do a lot of production shifts. I used to, I used to brew and I used to work in the cellar and I managed the quality department. I was in charge of a lot of the, well, the recipe development, raw materials, purchase both in hops and malt. Over the years, I had to give up actual physical production because it became more of a departmental management position. And over the last, I did all the production scheduling front to back, you know, from brewing to blending to filtration to packaging. Over the last two to three years, particularly over the last two, well, the last three with raw materials purchasing, we've moved that into more of its own department. It was way more complicated than I could handle by myself, probably five years ago. And so we, we saw that coming. I recognized it because I did not feel that I was doing things as well as they should be done. And then with my knowing I was gonna retire I started transitioning my other duties to my management team. So, I've stepped away the last year, year and a half from as much direct input into recipe development. But it became more of a managerial position and a lot of forecasting, you know, so, which one would assume.

McCulla: Well, I'm very curious about the recipe formulation process at Sierra Nevada. And certainly, you have been very much at the forefront of really developing an American palate for hops.

Dresler: Yes.

McCulla: And so, I'm curious about the original inspiration to brew with.

00:11:13 Dresler: Well, when I came on we had, we had three year-round beers. We had our pale ale, porter, and stout. And Ken had done the first year of his Celebration Ale, which was an IPA style. At the time, somebody wrote about it referring to it as a renaissance IPA, because it was very much Americanized compared to English IPAs. Hop-fronted as opposed to malt-fronted. Ken really wanted to, part of his brewing vision was to set the tone, that was very radical a time for flavor and aroma and, and bitterness. And so, as we would develop new beers, you know, when we did the Bigfoot Barleywine, and as we developed new beers, I would always look at impactful flavors and aromas, but I would always look for balance between bitterness and body and always a nice aroma. And so, I got to do most, for a number of years, I basically came up with a lot of recipes on my own. You know, I would bounce an idea off of Ken, say I would like to make. And this wasn't until probably 1989, 1990 because we had limitations at the brewery on Gilman, and so we didn't really have enough play time as we would have liked. So, when we were, got moved over here in '89, '90, and we had a pub, then we got to proliferate our varieties of beer quite a bit. And so, I got to play around with stuff. And so, I would propose an idea, and then I would go off to my office and make notes on paper and put something together in my head. So now we do, there was a lot of inputs into, into recipe development and really slows it down. So, but that's as it, perhaps as it should be. And that was a lot of fun, you know, one of the styles and recipes of beer that I'm the most proud of is we were the first
00:13:27 to brew with wet hops. And so that was a suggestion given to me by a friend in the hop industry. And that was pretty typical of what we would do at the time. I relayed this suggestion to Ken, and said I'd really like to give it a shot, and he said, well go ahead and do it. And it started a whole style revolution in the craft brewing industry. The first beer that I brewed, formulated and brewed for our taproom, was an English-style brown ale that I really wanted to make. I like malt, nice malty beers. And I asked Ken if I could do that draft only for the pub. And, one of the privileges of working here is, his answer was pretty typical, he was just like, go ahead and do it but just make the best beer with the best ingredients you can. You know, and so it's like, go off and do whatever. So, it's, that's a, that's a real pleasure.

00:14:24 McCulla: What would you describe as the benefits and challenges of working with whole-cone hops?

Dresler: The benefits, I think the aromatic qualities are just incredible. You know, one of our philosophies for a long time here was to use raw materials with the

least amount of input or processing, which met, which very much was in line with my personal philosophy of what I like to consume. You know, as we grew and we were still staying with that stipulation, that was the cause for a lot of real creative innovation. So, when we wanted to dry hop, increase our post-fermentation hopped beers, particularly when we got, doing Celebration Ale and Torpedo IPA, that initiated our development of our Torpedo hopping process so that we could increase our production of post-fermentation beers without addition of fermenter infrastructure. So, you know, you have a challenge, and so in an effort to meet

00:15:34 that challenge you have to create. We have since, because of the way the palate and levels of intensity have gone, you know, we have, we've gotten very creative once again, and we developed with some of our hop growers the wet hop distilled oil that we use in Hop Hunter. We worked with some of our hop suppliers, and worked on a product that they were working on, which was a lupulin type powder product, where a lot, so just so you can get levels of intensity up without using more and more whole-cone hops. You lose a lot of beer with the usage of whole-cone hops 'cause they tend to soak up a lot of beer. Personally, I think that they still, for my palate, they still denote the best flavor in aromatic qualities, done right, so.

00:16:26 McCulla: I'm curious also about the consumer reaction in the early days to these aggressively hopped beers, and to what extent consumers drove your innovations with hops?

Dresler: I drove my friends' palates because the beer was free.

[Laughter]

Dresler: So, they finally overcame the fact that, you know, they were drinking. And they, I mean, everybody thought it was very, very bitter. And, you know, it was so different. You know, I think I, you know the, the American palate in pockets, and more generally now, but in certain pockets within the country, you know, the Bay Area or different foodie type markets, and I'm not big on that term, but it kind of works with it, they wanted to explore, you know. They wanted to explore different flavors and flavor sensations and aromas, and beer went right along with that. And so, you look at that coordination. And the palates now, I mean, they're insatiable, you know, as far as levels of bitterness. I mean, when we did Pale Ale and it was 38, 39 Bus [Bittering Units] that was phenomenal for people to try and do. And bitter is not a pleasant sensory sensation. It's one of the most difficult to overcome. And, you know, now when you do an 80, 100 BU beers, you know, high alcohol has a sensory impact, and none of those things existed, in, in your face aromatics. Now everybody, not everybody, but people love those things, and they like the palate and sensory challenge in their beverage as the same as they do in their foods. You know, the going back to seeing what was available from a restaurant point of view in the early 1980s, it was very limiting. And now, you know, it's, it's fantastic. I love food, so I like to explore food as very much as well as beverage.

00:18:31 McCulla: So, in, especially in developing these very hoppy beers, I'd love to hear a little bit more about how you work with growers.

Dresler: We've always had a very close relationship with growers. And, you know, when Ken developed his first recipes he was totally intrigued with Cascade, which was the first American developed aroma hop. And whenever we would go to select, which we've always personally done, the only year we did not in my career was 9/11, 'cause we couldn't fly, and, but we've always gone to meet directly with our broker and/or grower and so that we could develop rapport and particularly commonalities of what you want. You know, in, have a, have a common dialogue so that they could know and, what we want. And then as the breeding programs developed early on in our careers, there were just, there were public breeding programs, and, like at Corvallis. And so, the hops would be presented to you by your supplier, if they had some they would come out of a
00:19:39 program and then we would buy them. As the hop breeding companies became more privatized, then we would go out to these experimental yards.

[Coughs]

Dresler: Excuse me. And walk with the breeder and pull off the vines and do aromatic checks. And then we would make requests. Can you up this into a certain acre plot? We'll guarantee purchase it. And we worked very closely with all of them. And because we have that commonality, you'd, you would go out to a field and they would say, you have to try this one. And so, you know, 'cause they knew, they knew what you wanted to look at, they knew what our particulars were. And we were, I think that we were ahead of the game on that. And because, number one we were ahead of the game on a lot of things, but also, just being very proactive in letting everybody know that we wanted, we wanted what was new, and we wanted our hands on it as soon as we could get it. And Ken, even back in the day, when there weren't as many resources, he was never afraid to guarantee to step out and partner, so that, you know, if you want to go from a half a row to a half an acre, he would say, you know, I will buy this. And so, it gave that level of security for both, and so they were always willing to step forward on our behalf.

McCulla: And I think this gets to the question of scale, which is that, you know, Sierra Nevada has expanded so much.

Dresler: Yes.

McCulla: During your time here. Not all craft breweries have been able to do that.

Dresler: Mmhmm.

00:21:17 McCulla: Have wanted to do that, and so I'm curious how the growth has impacted your work as a brew master?

Dresler: That's when it became more of an administrative managerial, managerial part of my job. So, you know, you go from, as I described, doing everything within a very small company to becoming departmentalized. Which has some benefit, but also some negativity. You know, as we grew, we, at this brewery, as we grew we did that intentionally for levels of efficiency and specialization. We've worked very hard over the last few years to actually retreat on some of that
00:22:04 because we're trying to go back now into a more diversified work force. When we set up our brewery on the east coast in Mills River, the brewery was designed such that a brewer operator could do everything. And we're not set up that way here. You toured through, and you can see everything's kind of popped around in different real estate. And so different, different philosophy now. As these things, as the brewery grew and my staff, as I was more regulated in having my staff duties become more specified, I had a real sense that we were losing something, because then you only worked in the brew house, or you only worked in the cellar, or you only work in filtration. And I used to have myself or my staff, you would brew for a week, you would cellar the beer you brewed the next week, and then more likely than not you would be running micro on it the following week. And so that was, that's, that's a real nice treat. You know, that's, that's everything involved, and now the brewers for the most part come in and make wort. And they're, you know, they're very happy, you know. People here are very happy with their jobs, but I find it, having experienced it the way, I would find it creatively limiting, and much less stimulating. So, that is part of something that in hindsight, you know, we could have been more aware of perhaps. We were, we were really busy, you know, when in the nineties when we were chasing thirty percent growth curves, you didn't have much time to think back what you're doing. Great place to be.

[Laughter]

00:24:00 McCulla: To what extent, if any, does canning versus bottling change your work?

Dresler: You know, it's really pretty funny, that goes back to some philosophical issues because, you know, back when we were doing the craft beer, you know, quality beer didn't come in cans, you know. And that was a very, in hindsight, a dumb ideology. I, you know, I'm not a canned beer drinker. I, I always pour my beer out given the opportunity, and serve it properly. But cans are fantastic. You know, from, I love everything about them. I love the lower weight, the recyclability, you know, they're so functional, from a recreational sporting point of view. It's funny how those perceptions have changed within the craft segment. Looking back on it we were kind of snooty, I suppose. I remember when, when I first started drinking beer, quality beers had that cork liner in them, you know, 'cause we were drinking imports. And as we all know now cork liners are terrible for oxygen ingress, and it was by far, in a way, less quality beer probably by the

time you had it. But it's funny, it's fun to look back on the canning dilemma, you know. We were never gonna put fruit in beers either, and now we put fruit beers in cans.

[Laughter]

Dresler: It's a, it's kind of fun.

00:25:30 McCulla: And I think that gets to the question of a Sierra Nevada brand. How might you define a Sierra Nevada brand?

Dresler: Overall?

McCulla: Yeah.

Dresler: Uh, quality. Yes. I was asked, I was in San Diego working in the market this last weekend, and I was asked of what, what thing that I was the most proud of in my career or with the brewery, and there are a lot of things to be proud of, and, but our constant adherence to quality. It drives everything, you know. There's, you know, there's, you look at quality before you look at the ROI. And that's also been a real privilege working here, you know. You don't serve a beer out because you want to recoup your money in it. You throw it away. So, and I know other, I know places that don't do that. And so, you know, that's, been it,
00:26:31 you know. Our sustainability efforts, I'm incredibly proud of those. I think that's very much identified with the Sierra Nevada brand, because we spent most of our history totally non-promoting, 'cause kind of met, matched our personalities. We lost some opportunity really getting our story out as to how cutting edge we were on that. Even back in the eighties, Ken always did everything as far as heat and energy and water recovery that we could. And there again that's one of the real pleasures of working here because that small footprint way to live matches my personal life. You know, I compost and recycle and do all of that stuff 'cause it's the right thing to do. And we were doing that back as soon as we could, you know, as soon as we were available, these services were available to us. You know, we took advantage of them as a company. So, that's, other than the beers that we make within the company footprint, that would probably be the second most point of pride for me from a personal and professional level, is our stewardship within the community and the environment.

McCulla: A couple big questions to wrap up. The first, is, you've obviously long been involved in the making of beer.

Dresler: MmHmm.

00:28:03 McCulla: The tools and the ingredients required. Would you say, is there one object, that if it could kind of tell your story to the world or comprise your career, what might that thing be?

Dresler: One object?

McCulla: Yeah.

Dresler: Or one liquid?

[Laughter]

McCulla: [unintelligible] Up to you.

Dresler: Boy, I don't, that is, that's a tough one.

[Long Pause]

Dresler: I'll have to mull that one over.

Paula Johnson: One or two? I mean is there?

[Laughter]

00:28:31 Dresler: Well, you know, I would, I would say some of the beers that I've mentioned, I'm incredibly proud of those. I'm incredibly proud of my, my recognition within my professional community. I've never judged my career or my placement on my own opinion, but on the opinions of others, my peer group and my friends and, you know, looking back on that as an achievement. Retiring here now soon and moving away from that I'd say I'm incredibly proud of that. If I could, if I could objectify that, we could go ahead and.

McCulla: Maybe not necessary.

Dresler: Put that in a, we could, we could put that in a box.

[Laughter]

Johnson: Send it to the Smithsonian.

Dresler: Yes.

[Laughter]

Dresler: Yeah, and what that would look like God only knows.

[Laughter]

Johnson: We'd take it [unintelligible].

Dresler: It would have some rough edges, I'm sure.

00:29:29 McCulla: Okay. And then maybe one final, big question. What is craft beer?

Dresler: What is craft beer? I mean, it's, it's, my, my perception has always been that craft beer is traditionally brewed and handled with traditional raw materials. And that's, and that's changed over the years. There's gotta be a quality aspect involved. It used to be somewhat of an issue of size, you know, microbrewing to craft brewer. Now there's a lot of issues of ownership, which, which has politicized that a bit. But, craft to me has always been synonymous with quality. And I, and I don't say that to demean in any way non-craft beers, because I never speak poorly of anyone's beer if it's properly made and what they want to do. But, craft beer is flavor. Craft beer is exploring. Craft beer is pushing boundaries and limitations. It's brewing without labels, you know, brewing without categorization, a lot. So, it's very multi-faceted in that regard, and it's, and it's, my sense of craft brewing or beer is markedly different than it was twenty, twenty-five years ago because the craft beer landscape is markedly different than it was twenty, twenty-five years ago. So, things evolve. Yeah.

00:31:25 McCulla: I'll slip one more in. What do you see for the next ten, ten, fifteen years of craft?

Dresler: It should be very interesting. You know, here again, nobody for the most of my career ever thought we would have five thousand breweries in this country. So, at what level do you become, have saturation? And at some point, you know, there will be a shake out and haves and the have-nots. My fear, more and more, is that with proliferation of the number of breweries that there will be potentially a dilution of quality and potentially dilution of passion. You know, if you go, we got into the business to make and enjoy really good beer and share it with our friends. It's a little bit easier now over the last few years to get into the brewing industry to make a good amount of money in three to five. And so that's, that has potential. And I think that, that potential will be part of the factor that could dilute quality. And the worst thing in the world as a brewer is to have somebody put out a bad beer. You know, because that takes away from all of ours, craft, art form, and it detracts from the work of everyone else. And so that's, that's I think is
00:33:04 gonna happen a little bit more. By the same token, I have to say that over the last years of proliferation of breweries, looking at the number of breweries and the beers that I've experienced, as opposed to early on, when there was some expansion in, a lot of expansion in craft brewing, the level of quality is incredibly, it's amazing. I mean, these little breweries that are coming in and making really, really good beers, they have better equipment, they have more selection of raw materials, they often have a better educated staff in the science of brewing, than the first part of my career, the first third of my career, I'd say. So, there's, it'll be very interesting.

McCulla: Great.

Dresler: Yeah.

McCulla: Well, thank you, thank you.

Dresler: Thank you very much.

McCulla: Thank you very much for your time.

Dresler: It's been my pleasure.

Johnson: Thank you.

Dresler: Yeah.