

Name of Interviewee: Annie Johnson
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Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
Length of Interview: 68:20 minutes

00:00:00 [It's December 7, 2017. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I'm interviewing Annie Johnson, Brewmaster-in-Residence at PicoBrew. We're meeting at the offices of PicoBrew in Seattle, Washington and this interview is] part of the American Brewing History Initiative, which is a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in America. So, Annie, when and where were you born?

Annie Johnson: I was born in Augsburg, Germany, in 1965.

McCulla: And who were your parents?

Johnson: My parents are Robert and Arlys Johnson. They are no longer alive.

McCulla: And did you grow up in Germany?

00:00:25 Johnson: I did. I was adopted. And I was adopted just at four days old. And we were there for about three years before we moved back to the States. We were a mixed family. My adopted parents were white. They had a son already, my older brother Karl. And then another adopted sister, she's older than I am, LeeAnn. And her father was an African-American GI like mine. And they adopted her. So, the best place for us to move when we were coming back to the States in the sixties was New Mexico. New Mexico had-, you were either gringo or Hispanic. So, they just had the two classifications, so it was a good place for us. My father was originally from Los Angeles, and my mother was from Minnesota. So, it just seemed like a good place to go. And, before my dad got his first teaching post, which was in Northern California where we moved in the seventies. And I stayed there throughout college.

McCulla: Okay. And.

Johnson: Until I came here.

McCulla: And what, what are some of your memories of childhood, especially in terms of the food and drink culture of your family?

00:01:32 Johnson: Oh, my mother was a terrific hostess, and a really good home cook. I remember when I was a teenager, we were, they were back overseas at that time, and they were living in Abu Dhabi. And I was going to school in Alexandria, Egypt. And I came home, and my mom said, "We're gonna have a dinner party tonight. We're having over the French Ambassador and his wife." And she cooked French food because she had spent some time in France early in her

career. And I remember the Ambassador and his wife saying it was just like being home. So, that always stuck with me, is, it must have been the ultimate compliment for her. And our, and she, she made all the classic French dishes. French onion soup. And she had shells where she made her own escargots. It was, it was wonderful. It was just a great evening. And it always struck me as, what a wonderful night, so, I always loved doing that myself, hosting people, cooking. I love cooking. You know, like, brewing is just an extension of cooking for me. And then just, you know, giving your foods or your beers to people and seeing their reaction, and then creating that flavor memory. And it's like that for me, too, that when I go to a brewery, or I have something that really strikes a memory in me, a flavor memory. And I never forget it. I use that in my brewing, too. I have something, I think about it, and it just sticks there, and maybe, it might be three years, five years, but I'll brew that, 'cause I want to re-create the goodness of the memory. It makes me feel good.

McCulla: How did your mom learn how to cook?

00:03:26 Johnson: She was self-taught. She was raised in Minnes-, rural Minnesota. Her family had a turkey ranch. [Chuckles] And Christmas trees. Her father was an agricultural engineer and a professor at St. Cloud, and so, she was the oldest daughter. And it, her mother was ill and away from the family for long periods, and then would come back. So it was my mother's responsibility with six kids to take care of the home. She was at a young age basically responsible for everything, while her father taught and then her brothers maintained the ranch. And it was, it was, they were very, they weren't wealthy at all. I mean, it was the thirties. And, but, her father was also a part-time pastor, so Thanksgiving, everybody in the community got a turkey 'cause they would give them away. And they also had Christmas trees because they had a little bit of land. Everybody got a Christmas tree. So, she always had that spirit of giving, making people feel good. And, but cooking was just part of what she needed to do. I remember she told me she learned to drive at thirteen because she had to, she had to learn how to drive and get around the community in Minnesota. I know it was difficult for her. She didn't talk about it a lot. I think it might be that, a generational thing, that, you know, she, it was just something that you did. But, you know, and then growing up with them both teachers, we didn't, we were modest income, didn't have a lot. And so, we always cooked and she was a great seamstress, so she taught my sisters how to sew. They didn't have that much interest in cooking, and I got the cooking thing. And so, it was good and, my brother's not much of a cook but [chuckles], he did teach me how to change my own oil and change my own brakes. So, he, you know, he's, so, we got something, you just, we got something from growing up that was good. We've been able to, I don't know, make our own.

00:05:47 McCulla: And could you talk a bit about your international travel experience, or your time studying, living abroad?

Johnson: Sure, well, I, when we moved back to the States, and then we settled in, after New Mexico, we moved to Northern California. And then when I was, after my freshman year of high school, my folks decided they wanted to move back overseas. And this is something that they had done prior to having a family. My mother at twenty-three had moved over to Europe on a U.S. Army Beethoven Scholarship. She was an accomplished singer and a piano player, so she got the opportunity to play for the troops in the fifties. And then my dad was, he was in the Army. And so, they had originally met at Yellowstone working their way through college. And they had a long-distance relationship. But they had, always had that bug, and they wanted to get back overseas. So, with my brother in the Navy, and my sister was in college, they decided to move. And they went to the Middle East, to Abu Dhabi. And my dad got a great job there as a principal and my mother was the music teacher. Which she really enjoyed, because in the States she was an English, English teacher and German, she spoke German. So, this was a chance for her to be the music teacher. So, she liked that. And there was no school there. They had English school system, but my parents wanted me to do American, so, the closest school was in Alexandria, Egypt. So, I went to boarding school for a couple of years there, and, which was an experience. I hated it at first, but I got into it. And, I've made such good friends. It was a small school. And Alexandria's way up at the coast, and there's not, it, it was very different for me. It's a big city. It's small considering Egypt's standards, it's three million, but that's huge for me coming from a small town of, you know, forty thousand. So, I did my best, and I actually did really well, and, like I said, I made great friends, and we're still friends today. People, I have all over the world, and it's nice that we've connected, especially through Facebook. But, we've, we've maintained this. And then this school I went to, Schutz American School, there's a reunion for everybody who's gone there over the years, meets once a year. And they, it's unique, it was a unique situation and opportunity. And it's, I don't know, unless you go to a boarding school overseas, you don't, it's hard to express what that is, but you make, it's just a small amount of time that you spend with somebody, but the bond is so great. You know, the bond. I have a good friend who, she lives in the U.K., and when we chat it's like, you know, we've, we, we're together every day. But we were only together for nine months in 1981, and that was it. [Chuckles]

00:09:13 McCulla: And so, what did you study in school? And what was your early career-?

Johnson: It was just finishing high school.

McCulla: Okay.

Johnson: Yeah. So, I finished and then. And then I came back to the States, back to Northern California, to Sacramento. And I went to college at Sacramento State.

McCulla: And what did you study there?

Johnson: I, originally I was an art major, 'cause I love art, and communications, but my dad say, [Chuckles] "There's nothing for you in art." Which was sad 'cause my dad was an educator, but I thought you're supposed to be on the side of the student. But, so, anyway, I finished that. And then I started to work for the state of California. And then they sent me to U.C. Davis, and I did software development. And so, that's what I've been, I was a business analyst for twenty years with the legislature.

McCulla: And at what point does beer enter the story?

00:10:02 Johnson: Beer. Beer was always in the picture. [Laughter] I have always loved beer. My first experience were my mother, 'cause she had, her time in Germany, she had this stein collection, and some had music boxes on the bottom. And they're beautiful, and she would explain to me what the, the panels are, because they have these great panels on them, and the history of beer, and, and beverages in general. I was just fascinated with German wines, as my mother could tell me the difference between a Rhine wine and a French Mosel and all the differences and the shape of a bottle. And I'm not sure why I thought that that was, I latched onto that, but it was probably going back to that flavor memory, 'cause she used to enjoy a good glass of wine or a really good beer. And so, she'd have to have it in a proper glassware, or it just doesn't taste the same, which it probably does but it just stuck with me. And so, I thought about it and I had a best friend, still my best friend who lives in Albuquerque, and I said, "Rosie, we gotta brew some beer. We're gonna do this." She's like, "Let's do it!" And then we didn't do anything at all. And then I, I was in Fort Bragg, California, and I pass a homebrew shop, and I bought it, I bought a kit, 'cause I had some cash 'cause I had worked for a concert promoter, and we had just finished Reggae on the River, which was a, is a, one of the best concerts ever. But they pay you, and then you go and decompress. You know, you're over in Humboldt County, and you come over to Fort Bragg, Mendocino. And so, I bought this kit, I took it back to Sacramento, I went to Rosie's house, and we looked at it, and her husband Josh, and I thought, "Well, let's just do it." So, we started on Sundays, and we would always watch football, they're big Raiders fans, I'm a big baseball fan, but. And so, we made our first beer, which is a, was a Tim Brown Ale, 'cause Tim Brown, Timmy Brown was a star on the Raider's. And then we started going on, and it was terrible. I think the first bottle is probably still orbiting [chuckles] the universe, 'cause it was just too over carbonated. But they were getting better. And so, we named them all after Oakland Athletics and Oakland Raiders players, so we had our Plunkett Porter, we had our Rollie Fingers Red, which is still one of my favorite beers. So, we have all these beers that we're making. And then Rosie got a job transfer to Delaware. So, she left. And so she took the kit. She took everything with her, 'cause I gave it to her essentially. And so, that was it for a few months. And then I got a package on my doorstep and it was the whole homebrew kit, and it was a huge box of beer. I thought, I opened it up and it was a bunch of big 750ml Dogfish Head beers. I've never heard of these beers. The

labels were, the art was beautiful. I thought, “What is this?” and, she said, “This brewery that’s fifteen minutes from my house in Rehoboth. You gotta check it out. I sent you a bunch.” And she sent me the kit. So, I was drinking [unintelligible], these are fantastic. And so, I started brewing more and more and more on my own. And then I took, I thought, “Well, I’m gonna take one of these beers and put it in the California State Fair. And it was a version of our Rollie Red. And I put it in, and I got a first place. I was so excited. A big, fat, blue rosette. And I was hooked.

00:14:00 McCulla: Can you describe, do you remember the, the fair? What was it like, you know...?

Johnson: The fair’s a big deal in California. The fairgrounds, there’s dedicated fairgrounds. People come from all over. And it’s a, it’s a, you know, California being such a big agricultural state, they have, you know, horse races and they have FFA and they have auctions, and, you know, it’s a, it’s, and it’s quite a big food fair, and there’s a big wine pavilion, which is one of my favorite attractions. [Laughs.] And, so it’s a big food and beverage event. And they have this competition for homebrewers. They have a label competition, they do home beer, homebrew, home winemaking, and commercial winemaking, and commercial beer. And it’s a big deal if you get into the best of show, you get the Golden Bear, which I wanted so bad and never got it. I got so close. I, four times I got really close to gettin’ the Golden Bear. And I had one friend who got it twice, and he’s like, “I have bookends.” You know, I said, “Okay, well, I’ll show you.” But, it’s a big deal. And their rosettes are probably, oh, across, are a good six inches. It looks like a horse rosette. And winning that. And then they had an awards ceremony. And it was my first introduction to the brewing community in Sacramento, which is great. And there are so many homebrewers there, and there were judges, and I never knew about the judging program. And that’s when I was first introduced to it. And they told me, “You want to be a better brewer? You need to be a judge. You want to enter the competitions? You need to give back to the community and you need to be a judge, and you have to go through the process of getting your credentials.” So, it was just something that you had to do. But it opened up the doors and it introduced me to all different kinds of people that I didn’t even know they were right there. And, that I would normally, probably would never meet. You know, and, but now I’ve met them, men and women. And, and then I met one gal, Beth Sangary, who lives in Placerville, which is just outside of Cali-, Sacramento. And Beth was a Grand Master Judge. Ooof. That’s, to get to that level, you have to go through the different ranks of the judging process. But you, you had to take tests, and it was a tasting exam and essay exam. It was ten questions on beer and you didn’t know what they were gonna be. I remember taking an exam one year and the question was, “Name four monastic breweries. Give the history, give commercial examples, and provide a recipe. And steps.” That was one question. But you wouldn’t know, ‘cause it could be anything about beer. It was about, off-flavors, recipe development, mineral, you know, water profiles, all kinds of historic things. But I met Beth, and she introduced me to the

Queen of Beer competition, which she started. And it was a ladies-only competition. It's in its twenty-first year now. And I entered. And I won. And that was my first Best of Show, in 2004. So, I had gone from that, with Rosie in the early days of our bad beers, and then getting the homebrew kit back, and then really getting into my first blue, to my Best of Show. And then from there, I just went crazy through the beer judge ranks to get as, you know, amass as many points as I could get, and try to get to Grand Master, which I'm not there yet 'cause it's really hard. [Laughter] But I did make National, which is good. And then, then brewing, and entering more competitions. And then realizing along the way that I was probably, I was one of the only females other than this Queen of Beer competition. There aren't, there really weren't that many. And there aren't as many now, but there's a lot more. But I'm really pleased to see how many more are in that professional, that are entering the professional, you know, realm of brewing. But.

00:18:32 McCulla: I want to ask, so I want to ask about a couple things.

Johnson: Yeah. Sure.

McCulla: So, to back up a little bit, as you were learn-, as you were learning how to brew, how did you learn? Did you use-?

Johnson: Oh, we, when I got the kit, and then we needed ingredients, there was a store in Sacramento, R&R Fermentation. They also sold firewood, which was weird. So, they had a, pretty bad ingredients, they were pretty stale, but we, we didn't know any better. So, we got them and then there was a printed sheet on what you needed to do. Pretty archaic, chisel and stone type instructions. And it was, it was a lot of figuring out, I don't know if a lot of people who will think back, I mean, this was in '99 at the time. There wasn't a lot on the internet. Most of the brewing pages were dedicated to European breweries and they were usually in German or in Flemish, so I was using a lot of Babel Fish, and translators, trying to get tips. Books, the books weren't that new. There were a few good books by Dr. George Fix which I still use. There weren't that many, and then, there weren't that many homebrewers, 'cause I hadn't been introduced to them yet. But I found a new shop in Sacramento, it was called The Original Homebrew Outlet. And the man that ran it, JJ, super nice. And he had a little, teeny, tiny homebrew club. And at the time I didn't know that they even existed. So, I started hanging out at the shop a lot. And he had fresher ingredients. [Laughter] And he had better recipes. So, he would help. And then once a month on a Saturday they did have a brew demo. And this man, Sam, would run it. And he would show you how to do things. So, that's how I really started to get into it and get better. And then it was a lot of trial and error. And I bought my first Bayou Classic, which is your classic turkey fryer. I still have it. I can ne-, I'm never get rid of it 'cause it, memories, you know? And that, it kind of just sits there. [Chuckles]

00:20:42 But, you know, you just. So, and then I, and then I started to look at classes on brewing. And then I, then I was introduced to, there's this whole beautiful

00:21:54 fermentation program twelve miles away at Davis. And so, they had classes that they would offer, so I took couple classes, and, with Dr. Lewis, who was, is just, I think he's just an advisor now, he's gotten, he's pretty advanced in age, but I learned a lot. And then I got his book that he was writing, which was very technical, and for professional brewers, but it had great information in it. And I still use it for reference. But that was it. And then things started to change. And I got introduced to the homebrewing community in Sacramento, and Beth, and then all these other resources that I didn't know were out there were starting to pop up more. And especially as the internet was getting a lot better, and then pages weren't always in a foreign language. So, that's, that's how I was starting to do better. And then I decided that I would tackle all the recognized styles of beer, and concentrate, and brew them. And then, and so I could really learn them. It was, for me it was a, best way to brew was to pick a particular style and then conquer those styles. Especially, I remember, Belgians, I spent three years just on Belgian beers. But, traditional Belgian brewing, and that's what they call an old school master, I'm very old school. I want to do it the way that it was developed before I'm gonna put a new spin on it. 'Cause how I'm gonna know what it tastes like, it's supposed to be, if I just go ahead and do a short version of, a short version of the brew process or, you know, fermentation techniques, speed it up? I don't wanna do that. I wanna do it the right way. Like, now I'm brewing one, I'm presenting a beer in January in Colorado, but it's beer in the champagne method, so I'm going through all the steps of making this beer, this Belgian beer. So, it looks like a beautiful brut beer. I'm doing it, the corking and the caging and the riddling and disgorgement, and all of that. So, it's, that's, that's what I do.

00:23:20 McCulla: Alright. And do you feel drawn to particular styles? Do you have favorites to brew?

Johnson: I do. I like the Czech beers. I really like Czech beers. I spent a long time on those. Decoction mashing, which is, was a historical way of getting the most that you can get out of your mash, 'cause mona-, malts weren't that well modified historically. They are now. So, there are, breweries here don't do them, but the Czech breweries still do, a lot of German breweries do. And I'm a big fan of it. I think it does make a beer taste better. So, that's, but that's a long process, that people don't necessarily wanna do at home. It's a good ten-hour brew day. And, you know, some wanna do just a four-, three-, four-, five-hour brew day. But I wanna do it the old school because I want it to taste like Pilsner Urquell, or Budvar, or any of the other breweries that I think that, that are still producing the delicious beer now that they were a hundred and fifty years ago. Be, some traditionalists. Yeah. So that, those are the styles I like. I like the Pilsners, Czech especially. And I love Belgians. And then I love American Amber. [Chuckles]

00:24:46 McCulla: Now could you talk a bit, please, about the process to, in 2013, famously, you won Homebrewer of the Year in the American Homebrewers Association. The second woman to win it. And, so, what was the process like in brewing that particular beer, and your memories of that competition?

Johnson: Sure. That was interesting. At the time, I wasn't feeling very well, so I had taken time off of work. And I hadn't, I wasn't really feeling like I was enjoying it. But, I, like, you know, I wasn't enjoying a lot of things. I didn't know what was wrong with me. And so I decided that I would brew this light lager from an article that was written in 2011-, 2006. And it stuck in my brain like the flavor memories do, this, I thought, "h I'm gonna do that beer. I'm gonna do this light lager 'cause this is technically, this is very difficult." This is a very long mash, steps. One of them is two hours, and on a very, very technical recipe. How you get this light beer, it's not just brewing a light gravity beer, it's very specific on how big breweries do it. That's why the little ones, the smaller craft breweries, don't. 'Cause it's a, it's a long process. And so, I decided I'll do that, 'cause that's gonna make me feel better, 'cause physically I was feeling terrible. So, I cranked it out. I cranked out two beers that year. I, the light lager, and then the, then, right before that it was the Czech Pilsner, and they were both really good. But the light lager, so, I thought, "Okay, I gotta put this in the preliminary," and then it passed to the next step. And then a few months later I, that I had to send it to Philadelphia. And I wasn't feeling good, and I thought, "I'm not gonna do this. No, I'll do it. I brewed it." So, I took it to FedEx to mail it, and they said, "It'll be \$130.00." What? [Chuckles]

00:27:03

I'm not gonna mail. I'm not gonna do it. And then I thought, "Well, might as well." I go, "It's not gonna win." So, I went ahead and sent it, and then I had my ticket, was ready to go to Philadelphia, I was gonna go to the conference, everything, and my dad was really sick. And my sister said, "I'm not sure that I would go." I said, "Yeah, I probably won't win anyways." So, I went, I stayed, and it was a good thing I stayed 'cause my dad didn't last much longer. And I was sitting, I went to an A's game, and I was sitting at this place called Beer Revolution, I got a text that said, "Hey, congratulations, you won, your beer." I said, "Oh, that's great. What did I get? Did I get second? Third?" And they said, "No, you got first." I said, "Oh, that's, oh, that's so great." And they go, "But, you won." I said, "What do you mean I won?" "You won it all." I go. "You're homebrewer of the year." I said, "You're kidding me." And I was sitting there at Beer Revolution, you know, all these beer people, and, you know, they're beer enthusiasts, and I said to this guy next to me, I said, "I just won Homebrewer of the Year." He's like, "Waaaaaah!" So, I went in and I bought this bottle of this Belgian beer that I love, Deus, which is the champagne method from this brewery Bosteels which is fabulous. And I had it, and it was, I remember all the flavors 'cause it was a little bit of coriander in there, and it's a creamy, and a texture like a Clicquot champagne. And I thought, "This is great." So, I took the train home, 'cause I'd always take the Amtrak to the game, and I went to see my dad in the nursing home, and I said, "Dad, I won." You know, it, dementia. And I said, "I won." And he's like, he was, started crying, he cried.

[Chuckles]

00:29:00

And it was, it was awesome. It was great. And then the local paper, *The Bee*, the guy wrote me, he said, "Oh, it's so great. You won. A Sacramento gal." And I thought, "Oh, this is so good for Sacramento," because of the brewing community

that had helped me. And they were so nice. And it was just a big moment. It was, it was a huge moment. So, I was, I thought, this is great. And that article, I'll never forget it, 'cause I wrote the editor, Betsy Parks, great lady, and I said, "I, this is hu-, this is your break down that you got talking to a brewer about this beer." And I said, you know, "This is, this is for all-, this is for all of us." And so, and I spoke with Gordon Strong the next year at the conference, the following year when it was, what was the next year? Grand Rapids, Michigan. And he said, "I really pulled for your beer, when there were detractors, because of the style. It's a light lager. I mean, [unintelligible] going up against barleywines and stouts and Belgians and American IPA." He said, "Because it was technically, it was perfect." He goes, "I couldn't find anything wrong with it. And it was really good. It was the classic version of the style." And that's what I was going for. So, it was validation of what I do as a homebrewer: always trying to go for that classic style. This is how the brewery developed it, created it, and this is how it's supposed to be. And that's how I, that's how I like to do it. That's all. It was the coolest thing. Winning.

00:30:51 McCulla: And, and so, what was the impact of winning? What did it -?

Johnson: Oh! Well, it was interesting after that, it was a few months later that I was on a plane, and read about this robot [Chuckles] machine. I thought, and I, and I was, I was getting better physically. I was really starting to feel better. And I was talking to my brother. I said, "Do you see this?" And he goes, "You should write him a letter and tell him who you are." [Chuckles] And I said, "I will." 'Cause I was intrigued because, in my mind I'm thinking, "I have been homebrewing since 1998, and here are these three guys, cheersing each other with this Easy Bake Oven in the background, telling me they're gonna change the homebrewing world. No, you're not. You're gonna have to translate pages from German, Flemish. You're gonna have to do a lot more than that to be homebrewer. So, I was very skeptical. But, the judging half of me was, you don't judge, you just, you can't do that. You have to, you have to try something. So, they invited me in. I came in. And I tried the beer prepared to hate it. And I just, my, my, my judging palate told me that it was, it was good. And so, I was, I was happy, but I was, mm. 'Cause I know what it took for me to put out all my beers and especially with the light lager. And it was really good. And I told them, I said, "You know, these are pretty good. But don't take my word for it. Put them in competitions yourself and see what other people think." And so, they did. And they called me a few weeks later and, I think it was like three weeks later, and they had won first place. One of the brewing technicians had a machine at home. She had never homebrewed, she had only been brewing for six months. So, she made, she won, IPA category in Washington. Which is a big deal. So, I said, "Well there you go." And then they asked if they could have some recipes and things. I said, "Well, sure." "And we'll give you a machine." I thought, "Oh, boy." And so, then the friendship just developed, and I got to know the people at

PicoBrew. And, and then they offered me a position. And I thought, “Here, I have an opportunity to turn a hobby into a career.” In the past, you know, I, I had applied to a few breweries, but I, every door was shut in my face. So, here was a chance for me to be working somewhere that works with homebrewers, home users, and getting, you know, and making a living from it. So, it was a perfect. So, I, I feel like I have a dream job.

McCulla: What year did you join PicoBrew?

Johnson: 2013.

McCulla: Okay.

Johnson: Yeah. At the end of the, at the end of the, December 2013.

McCulla: And can you describe a bit what, what is the company all about? What do you sell?

00:34:04 Johnson: So, PicoBrew manufactures homebrewing equipment. So, we have different products depending on your level of homebrewing knowledge. We have advanced equipment for breweries, labs, hardcore homebrewers, like myself. And then we also have a smaller machine, the Pico, that is for beer enthusiasts. They can put it on their countertop, come home, and brew, and have this brewery’s delicious beer right, you know, in ten days. So, it’s been another challenge, whereas I am such a classic brewer, to use automated equipment to get the same flavors is, is, is important to me. It’s a big deal. So, it’s, it, I love the challenges that I, that I get on the job. And then presenting that to a brewery, because we work with a lot of brewery partners that it’s, that, they go, “Yeah, that’s my beer.” That’s great, especially when you’re working with some giant breweries. And then a lot of the small craft breweries, too. And then to spread that around, because their machines are all over the world, to have people brewing, and seeing on a map, just little pint glasses jumping up and down. And I can see who’s brewing, you know, there were, we have a guy, a regular brewer in Namibia, who brews and I just saw one on our brew map the other day, a guy that’s brewing in Cairo. I thought, “I’m gonna send him a note.” [Chuckles] You know. And, and so it’s, it’s really, it’s really a cool thing. ‘Cause, you know, I, at, in the beginning I was very standoffish. And the company was new, and nobody knew them from anything, and then I joined on, and I got a little bit of that finger-wagging from, from the homebrew community. Like, “What are you doing?” And I said, “Well, we can’t covet this hobby. Why, why are we coveting this hobby? Who are we to tell anybody how to brew? We, you can’t do that. You have to let people, I mean, it doesn’t matter.” This guy wants to use a pot, or this gal uses, you know, a three-tier system. Or this person uses a, you know, one of our products. Or somebody else’s product. It’s a, it’s, it’s, it’s their choice. I mean, it’s a, it’s supposed to be fun and satisfying. And how you get there is up to you. Nobody defines how people should brew beer. You know?

00:36:46 McCulla: And so, who, who are the different kinds of people who benefit from PicoBrew's system?

Johnson: Oh, it, people that, that live in cities, that don't have a lot of space. I mean, our products don't, you don't need a garage or a, you know, backyard to brew. People with, that are alter-abled are very near and dear to my heart, that, people that are getting back into brewing. I have some, some customers that are older, that have arthritis, and they're so excited. There was one guy, his name is Jess, and he, I met him in Grand Rapids. He's like, "I'm gonna get one of these." And he had horrible rheumatoid arthritis. He says, "I haven't been able to lift." And so, you don't have to lift with, with our products. So, that was a big deal for me, you know? It's a, it's a big, I get, beer is my life, so I get really emotional about it. To, that somebody who couldn't do something before, or who had to sit in the wings, or, perhaps they were infirmed or wheelchair-bound, and they, they would have fun at the homebrew club and the party and everything, but they couldn't do a lot. Well, you know, throw in the hops, but here, they can do it all, on their own, which is, that, that's cool. [Chuckles] That's nice. I love that, that anybody can brew. And so, my next big hurdle here at PicoBrew is to get some, some software with our awesome software team to, to, for people that are sight-impaired. That'll be it. We cover that, we got it all. You know? So.

00:38:29 McCulla: Well this, this, that partly answers this next question, but I'm wondering, when you think of the really big picture, the, what is the potential or the role of technology in brewing?

Johnson: Oh, it's limitless. It's a, it's huge, it's amazing to me. The advances. And seeing it firsthand here at PicoBrew is, the technology and, and then seeing it, and other breweries in the, the brewing software, and people that have developed recipe crafters, like BeerSmith and Brewtoad and all these different things that people use to make a better, you know, to make a better product. Make it easier, and consistency. And I see the developments in technology with yeast companies, like White Labs, the way their, grow their yeast now on sheets and stamp it out so they have less handling and less chance for contamination. It's fascinating. It's, it's, and maltsters. And there's local maltster, one north of here in Skagit Valley that developed their own malting machine. So, they're taking those old practices, but they're making something new. And then especially for people that are engineers and software-driven, technology-driven, that didn't come from a traditional brewing background. They don't have that burden of, "It's gotta be this way or no way." They're able to think outside the box. Like, like, the founders here at PicoBrew, they weren't good homebrewers, they're lousy homebrewers. How can they, you know, how can, how can I make better beer and I'm, I have a, this technology, this software background. And I have, one guy that has an engineering background, one guy is a food scientist. How will we put these all together? We should be able to do this. And boom. There it is. And then to see the wave. Obviously, we're doing something right because there's

others that have come on the market. So, it's, it's, it's cool. I mean, people never thought cellphones would, I remember we used to carry it around in a suitcase. [Laughter] And now, it's practically in a, in a, you know, a limb, appendage for people, their cellphone. So, it just, it's fascinating. And it's really, it's really, it's really cool. It's really cool.

00:41:07 McCulla: As you've talked about extensively, such an important theme in homebrewing is community, a sense of community.

Johnson: Yeah.

McCulla: And so, I'm curious what form community takes with relation to the brews beer, uh, beers brewed through PicoBrew systems?

00:42:55 Johnson: Oh, yeah. Our online community is wonderful. And not only they talk, you know, on forums that we've created, and then share the recipes, and looking on the map, and getting to know people on all these different, different areas of the world. Our brewers that are our partners that provide their beers for people to brew are also involved because they're seeing their beer being brewed in another, on another continent, where they normally just have a, maybe a fifty-mile distribution. It's super, super cool the way it brings people in. And in a sense, it's kind of democratizing, the distribution process, where a brewery doesn't have to rely on someone else to send their beer, let it sit somewhere, on a dock, dock, and then them get it out and deliver it, and who knows what shape it arrives in. Here they have a someone who is gonna brew just this small amount that they drink at home that's fresh the way the brewery intended, so that it'd be as if they were coming to the brewery and sittin' in the taproom. But the taproom's their house. So, they can, they can just make it right there. I think that's a very cool aspect of, of the, of the, of our brewery partnership program that we have. But, but the other thing is where they can all chat with each other. And they can try these different things. And I think as an, here in the States, as Americans, we take it for granted that everybody's got craft beer where, where they are. And that's not the case in Southeast Asia or South America, or even Europe. You've got big, you know, pale lagers, maybe amber lagers, national beers. You don't have a lot of what we have here. And this is quite a thing for people to be able to do. As, as the brewing revolution, I call it, moves into other areas of the, of the globe, you know, this is something that they have that they can do. And have different hops, you know, different flavors. What's the, you know, what, "I wanna try that IPA that I've been hearing about." You know, "I wanna have those things if I lived somewhere else." So, it's really popular in, especially in Europe, and South America, the want, in Asia, and Japan, is huge. I want, we get, we get emails all the time, "Can, I want this, I want this, I want this." So, you know, we make 'em, we send 'em everywhere. So, it's pretty, it's neat, I love the community aspect. Beer is community, anyway. If you're a huge sports fan like me, you tailgate. Part of the fun of the game is the tailgating, you know. It's a commun-, it's community.

Makes us feel good, especially when things aren't going so good in the community.

00:44:35 McCulla: Well, in a really interesting way you're tapped into very local beer and,

Johnson: Yeah.

McCulla: And brewing cultures. And extremely global.

Johnson: Exactly.

McCulla: Cultures.

Johnson: Yeah.

McCulla: And so, what do you think about the role of American beer in the world today? How would you describe our, the prominence of it today?

Johnson: I think it's, I think it's definitely breached outside of the borders. It's, it's really catching on when I was in Germany in August, to visit some craft breweries there, and they're loving the styles. And it's something that they want. And, and, they want diff-, they want something different. They love their national brands. They love their, all those small breweries, the independent breweries, but they want different flavors. Something different. Not always the same. Of course, when I go there, I just want their beer. [Laughter] You know? But it's, it's really breached borders. And it's catching on. And I think in some, you know, it's obvious that it makes large conglomerates, or brewing giants, I mean the big ones, nervous. 'Cause they've got holds on beers. But you can't have that, so, you can't have that here in the States. You can try, but you're, it's, the kind of the, you're kind of the bad guy. To squash it down. And I love it because in the time where the Ma and Pa, the corner stores, where they're kind of folding for the big box retailer, brewing, independent brewing is on the rise. So, a brewery that's local, that may never, ever go beyond a hundred miles in distribution, is thriving in business. And I'm, people like that. People like going and supporting their local brewery. They like making things at home. They like food movements. They're, they're cooking more at home. They want better ingredients. They don't want any more of the same stuff, the bland, flavorless foods and beverages. Go away. We want, we want other things. The same with the wine industry, all the small, independent winemakers. And it, I love it. The variety is great. The variety, it's wonderful thing to have. It's the way it should be, anyway. [Chuckles]

00:47:16 McCulla: So, and I'm curious, in broad strokes could you describe the process from start to finish, if you are converting a beer into something that could be brewed by a consumer at home, where do you, where do you start?

Johnson: Oh, here at PicoBrew.

McCulla: Correct, yeah.

00:49:56 Johnson: Well, with our Pico machine, and how we do this is we first contact a brewery, or they contact us, and they're interested because they see getting their brand name out there, through us, as a portal, so, we work with the brewery and get their recipe. And sometimes a recipe is for five hundred gallons, sometimes they'll give us a, one, that's five thousand gallons. So, here at the PicoBrew lab we convert that through a process that we developed into bringing all that flavor down to 1.25 gallons. Which is, is quite something when you're scaling down, there are a lot of things you have to do to create the same flavors. And so, we stick true to every brewery's beer. So, whatever ingredients they're using, we use. So, with over two hundred breweries that we work with, that's a lot of different kinds of malts and hops and yeast. They all are different. So, we convert that recipe here, and then we run it through our own QA analysis and independent lab tests. We send it back to the brewery, and they taste it. And sometimes the brewery wants a machine with the finished Pico pack that they can put in and brew it and see if they're getting the same thing, too. And they run it through their own. This is a big process we have with Rogue, John Maier, the neatest guy, he's dreamy. He, he brewed it. And he's a man of little words, but they have a lot of impact. And he said, "Loving it, I would, you know, up the bitterness 5 IBU. Good to go." That's a big deal, when you're working with a brewery of that caliber, and of course me as a fan, to get that. And then, and then we use, we, once we get the go-ahead, and we go with their branding and everything, and it's on point, and there're all the sign-offs, then we produce it at our factory that we built here in Washington and Redmond, and produce them, and send them fresh to the consumer so they can brew it at home. They all, they can talk to us if they're having a, it's not working out, or if it's great, we have rating systems. We have, you know, brand ambassadors that love it. And for them to have that variety. And then we also give them a secondary feature of our machines that just came out of the whole process with the technology, is they all work as a sous vide, so they can cook. [Chuckles] So, we have people that send us pictures. "I cooked my meal, and here's the beer that I made." So, they have like the complete, the complete package, so. But it's quite a process with the breweries. I'm really proud of it, for us to develop this product and get this program going in less than two years. It's a big deal. It's a, it's a big deal, quite a feat.

00:50:46 McCulla: And as the Master Brewer-in-residence, what kinds of particular skills that, learned through your brewing, have you, do you use in the creation of recipes here?

Johnson: Well, here, that's a good question. Recipe formulation, and, has really helped me a lot. I have a brewery's recipe, I'm, and what we need to do to take something big and make it small. And then my judging background, I'm the harshest critic there is. I get a, I have, we have two other brewers here, and so I know sometimes they dread coming into my office, or we sit down and we do our

tasting panel, because it's, it's very Caesar, thumbs up or down. Or, "You need to do this, or you gotta bump this, you gotta bump up that crystal malt, or your color is off." They're getting, or they'll get this sample and they're, they're gonna throw it right back in our face. That's the thing, you, your best chance to make an impression is when you send it in the first time. I don't want to send a brewery four different samples to try, and try to prove. I wanna get it, I wanna, I wanna have it, have it, have a really good chance of getting approval the minute it leaves here. So, that's, it's, there aren't really *tears*, but sometimes there are hurt feelings. [Laughs] But it's, it's, it's beer. It's gotta be good. It's, this is somebody's brewery's bread and butter that they're entrusting on, with us. We have to make it good, because who, if this guy's brewing it in Newfoundland, from a brewery from San Diego, and then maybe he goes to San Diego, says, "I made your beer at home and it was terrible," well, that's gonna come back. But, you know, we haven't had those, we haven't had any complaints on this so far. So that means we're doing a good job. [Laughter]

McCulla: I have a few questions to end on, and I think this is a nice segue to the first question, about the meaning of craft and the important of, the importance of artisan methods in brewing today. How might you define craft brewing today?

00:53:07 Johnson: Craft. I wish I could latch on to that word. Sometimes I hate it. And then sometimes I love it. But.

[Long Pause]

Johnson: Ask me again.

McCulla: Just how, how you might define, what is craft beer today?

Johnson: Okay. Definite-, craft beer is taking this beautiful, historic beverage and presenting it in your own way. I hope that didn't sound corny. But, it's creating it, and this, and hopefully breweries are enjoying the process as much as homebrewers do, because homebrewers aren't getting paid. And we love it. We love the hobby. We love it. We love the community. And it, so, I hope that the breweries are the same way. They're doing it because they love it. Because you, you can taste when a beer is made with love. Or with passion. It's in that glass versus, versus somebody who doesn't care. That's where I think that element comes in with craft. It's just made with, with love. Kind of the way my mom used to cook and be proud of something. You know, and it's taking that back from mass-produced macro beers. And putting, and taking it back to its roots where it came from. You know, you still have mass-produced beers in Europe, but there's still a craft there because they're sticking with traditions, brewing tradition. It's an, it's an, it's, that to me is still craft. Pilsner Urquell to me is still a craft beer, because it is a traditional beer that adheres to the, you know, Pilsner Urquell's original recipe, maintaining the original yeast strain, and then brew, and then

independent breweries here in the States, their craft, it's that passion. Hope that answers the question.

McCulla: It does. It does. It's a great answer.

Johnson: I get pretty, I can, I love it when I go to a brewery and I can feel it. You walk in the room, you're like, "I know I'm gonna like it." Even if I don't love it, love the beer, I love the atmosphere, I love, I love that.

00:55:42 McCulla: You have lived in Northern California, and now Seattle. Which are, they both are such important centers of brewing culture and history. And I wonder why, why is it that these two regions of the country have just been at such a forefront of what we are calling the craft beer revolution?

Johnson: I definitely, with Yakima and eastern Washington, the hops, and especially in Oregon where they grow them, that's a big part of it. I don't mean, know if people realize how much of the hop market comes out of Washington. It's somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy percent. And a lot of those hops stay here, and a *lot* of them go to Europe. So, you know, and, and then you just have these free, you have these free thinkers and people that brewed outside of the box. Like, I grew up thirty miles from Sierra Nevada. And, when I was in high school, Big Foot came out. 1983. And the Pale, and Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. I mean, that was the house beer. That was your go-to beer. And it was thinking about styles over, you know, that the brewers had from Europe. English beers, which I love. And making those. We got, we have only have our local ingredients. Let's, let's do that. And even where I grew up in Sacramento, it was all hop-growing region for, up until the late seventies. A lot of those hops went straight to San Francisco, to Anchor, and some of the other breweries. And it's just this agri-, rich agricultural area, and growing the ingredients. And then, let's use them. Let's breed different hops, and Wyeast out of, out of, you know, right near Hood River, in Oregon. And having, let's do yeast. Let's do this. Let's. So, it's very homegrown, but now it feeds this bigger community. And there's just a free, there's a free, there's a license to do what you wanna do out here. Well, let's take it to the next level. Who says I can't brew? Who says I can't take a lager and turn it into a, an IPL? Why can't I put -? Why do I have to stick with this German hop? Why can't I just put a, you know, Mosaic in it or make it something else? So, you have that creativity. And in California, what the, my favorite, one of my favorite styles, American Amber, that was, came right out of Red Tail. That was, now you have this new style, an offshoot of the Pale Ale. Kind of like American Brown Ale, it was, came right out of Texas, you know, Texas Brown Ale, that's what they call 'em down there. See, you just have people thinking about different things. I'm gonna make this. I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna make it different. I'm gonna make it my own. And usually it's stemming from traditional styles and puttin' your own twist on it, and crafting. Crafting and using local ingredients. And it's, and Seattle's a really good place for that because it's another community that fosters growth. And

00:59:07 especially with The Pike Brewing and Charles and Rose Ann Finkel. I don't know anybody in the brewing community, professional brewing community, and homebrewing, that doesn't think that they're the duke and duchess, that's what I call them. There are so many professional brewers that started at The Pike that have moved on. One of them, my favorite, Anderson Valley Brewing, Fal Anderson, he came, he came out of The Pike. And, and Dick Cantwell. And there was a really nice guy who, their brewery here in town, Cloudburst, he rose out the Elysian and all that, and it, it's one of the nicest industries to be in. It's really nice. And people help each other, and there's all good sharing of the ideas. But, you really get it out of Seattle, Portland, and Northern California. San Diego w-, will, will take issue with me. But, you really get it on the west coast. Boy, it, is it, this is the, the, it's the, it's the nerve center, or the brain collective for creativity that branches out. And there are other breweries, too, like Bell's or Original's, but I, if you had to bring it all back into one, it's gotta be Sierra Nevada. That's just a, there's nothing, I can't find anything wrong with their beer ever. And they never want to, but, I love it. I love that it's everywhere. I love that they have another brewery on the other side of the, of the country, to, to reduce the carbon footprint. There's good feelings behind that. Same with Lagunitas, they did that when opened in Chicago. Is to reduce that. We want good beer, but we don't wanna burn a bunch of gas getting it there, so.

McCulla: Just a couple questions to end. Studies do show that beer producers and consumers, they tend to be less diverse than is ideal, that largely white, largely male, and so I wanted to ask what your experiences have been like as a woman, and also a woman of color, in this particular industry?

01:01:24 Johnson: It's, I think when I was in learning homebrewing, and then when I thought that I could just break into the, a brewery, I don't know if it was being a female, or black, African-American, that, that was the door slamming in my face, or if it was just the state of the brewing industry. It's, I, even at fifty-two I'm still quite naïve and taken aback when people, "Well, you're black and you're female." I'm like, what? [Chuckles] I never think about those things. And I, it was, the way that being raised in a mixed family, you just, I just never saw color. I just, I never, I never saw color. And it's always alarming to me that that might be the reason. That you're female or that you're black. That's. So, it always, it just, it breaks my heart. And I know that a few times that that was, it happened. But, I don't, I think of my folks, and I, my dad would always say, "You just, well, when something bad happens you just go out and do something nice for somebody. You get, you, you know, go make somebody's day. You'll feel better if you go make somebody's day." So, that's the way I just cope and get through it, and. But, when I got here, with the

01:03:03 way that the founders here, the Mitchells especially, think, it, they don't, they're not thinking about any-, they're just like, they're just like most people. They're just like pretty much everybody, that, you don't, they don't see that. They're, we're all thinking about the same thing. How can we make good beer and do things. They didn't see that I was, you know, in my, at the time that I was in my

late forties, or that I was a female, or that I was black. Or the other thing, I never make an issue that I'm, that I'm gay. They never see those things. They don't care. It's, that's not what we're, what we're doing. That's not what we're about. You know? And that's not what beer should be about. I love it. Somebody at, that, in Baltimore said that it, this is a colorblind hobby. It is a colorblind hobby, not necessarily the industry. But I'd say ninety-eight percent of the time it is. I hope, does that answer your question?

01:04:09 McCulla: I wonder what, where there are opportunities to bring more people into brewing? Is it with, is it with brewers? Or is it through homebrewing? Is it through brewpubs? Places where you can enjoy beer?

Johnson: I think it's, you know, they, the indu-, all these breweries that are popping up in neighborhoods. It's exposure. People are going in, and they're going, "Wow! There's people in here that look just like me." And, and, this, just by, you know, circumstances, a lot of independent and craft brewers that are going to areas and saying, "Well I can't, I can't afford to open a brewery in downtown Seattle, but I can go to the outskirts. I can go to these areas where there may not have been businesses." And they may not, you know, that, you know, and, they may be poorer areas. And they're opening up, and people are coming. And so, that community develops, and people go, "Well, everybody looks just like me, we're only here for, we're here for the beer." To, that bad T-shirt, "Here for beer." But, that's the exposure of these, and specifically coming from these craft breweries, these small independents. They go to other, to areas and open up. And that's how people get introduced to, to craft beer and different flavors. Instead of this splashed out, crummy light beer sign, or the local corner market that only sells three kinds of beer. Now they're selling twelve different kinds of beer because people want those things. And that, and, and so, it just, it just, it's very organic the way it develops. Oh here, you oughta try this. Well, you have to try that. And they're, and they're, well that was, real flavors out there. And it's catching on, and I love it. I love that. It's, it's really good. I have, one of my best friends, Hispanic, she was, only drank Bud Light, and now she's, she loves Arrogant Bastard out of Stone. And, she, she'll go, "I need a Pale Ale. Where-?" She has to have, I have to have a beer with flavor, so that it's chan-, you know, somebody who probably was never gonna do it, even when having a friend who was a brewer, is, done, did it on her own. So, it, it's, it comes, when it comes right down to it, it's exposure.

01:06:41 McCulla: Great. And last question. The museum, you know, we often communicate with the public through objects. We tell stories through objects. And so, if, if you had to name an object that really conveys your career, or your philosophy about brewing, your life story, what, what do you think that might be?

Johnson: Oh, my mash paddle. I love my mash paddle. Yeah. It's, is like, that's my, my thing. When I touch it, I know I'm gonna make something good.

McCulla: Where did, when did you get that?

Johnson: My, uh, I have my, I still have my original, long-handled brewing spoon, that you, at one point was a beautiful ivory, now it's multi-colored from all the wort stains. I got that in 200-, 2000. I bought it when I met JJ at the one home, newer homebrew shop. And I still have it. And it's, it hasn't broken. I love it. I hang it on my brew stand. And then I have a stainless steel mash paddle that I got twelve years ago. And so, they're, those are my, those are my tools.

McCulla: Great.

Johnson: Yeah.

McCulla: Tools of your trade.

Johnson: Yeah, that and my favorite kettle. I love my, I love my, it's a converted keg, and I'll never get rid of it because I, that's where I made the bulk of my beers, and a lot of my winners, so I'll, even if I never use it again, I'll never [Chuckles] get rid of it.

McCulla: Wonderful. Okay, well thank you very much, Annie.

Johnson: Oh, thank you.

McCulla: It's been a pleasure.