

Names of Interviewees: Leah Wong Ashburn and Oscar Wong
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Name of Interviewer: Theresa McCulla
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Theresa McCulla: It's January 5, 2021. This is Theresa McCulla of the National Museum of American History. I am interviewing Oscar Wong, Founder and Vice President of Highland Brewing Company, and Leah Wong Ashburn, President, CEO, and Family Owner of Highland Brewing Company in Asheville, North Carolina. I am at my home in Washington, D.C., Leah is at her home in Asheville, North Carolina, and Oscar is at the brewery in Asheville, North Carolina. This interview is part of the American Brewing History Initiative, a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in the United States. So, Oscar, we'll start with you. When and where were you born?

Oscar Wong: I was born in Kingston, Jamaica on October 21, 1940.

00:00:53 TM: And what were your parents' names? And what did they do?

OW: My dad's name was Wong Kim Yung. And my mother's name was Clarice Chung. And they were shopkeepers. Retail shopkeepers.

TM: What kind of, uh, what was their store like? What did they sell?

OW: Well, it was mostly groceries or food. And it was rather small. It was about fifteen feet by twenty-five feet. And, um, but, with high shelves. And we learned a lot by having to, uh, have a big hook to catch things from very high up rather than have a ladder. There was no space for a ladder. So, we learned very early that we could hook and catch cans or toilet paper or even glass sometimes, but they didn't like when we did that.

00:01:48 TM: And how did they come to live in Jamaica?

OW: They were from China. And my people were called the Hakka from Southern China, are the remnants of the old Chinese empire. And they were peasants, agricultural. And starting in the 1850s, they began migrating to five distinct locations, which are all British. Those were Singapore, Uganda, West Indies, Vancouver, and England. We happened to be the West Indies contingent. And so we ended up there.

TM: And, so, what do you remember about the neighborhood where you grew up? What was it like to grow up there?

OW: There were about three Chinese shops, retail shops, like our own, within, I'd say, a quarter-mile. Or half-mile of each other. I mean, radius. And mostly a Black community. There were some, um, what'd they say mulattos and a few

whites. Good customers of ours who were attorneys. And, um, very, almost, uh, by today's standards, I would say, um, countryside, uh, our term of suburbs. But, uh, very humble. And, uh, lots of gardens and, um, see-through fences that, uh, grew vegetables and flowers and, and it was kind of idyllic looking back on it.

00:03:25 TM: And so, when you were young, what do you recall about what you ate and drank as a child?

OW: We, we actually ate mostly Chinese food with a few occasional Jamaican foods, because we had servants. As poor as we were, we had, a grocery boy, so-called, who delivered groceries. And two maids who were, I think were paid about a dollar a week and were fed. I mean, that's, and then they got along with that. In fact, one of them ended up living with us. And I would say Chinese food was my basic staple. Uh, except for maybe breakfast. Usually before we would, headed off to school on our bikes we would actually get, um, a big hot ham sandwich, Ovaltine, and um, big breakfast. I still do that to this day. [Chuckles]

00:04:25 TM: And, where did you go to school? And, what subjects did you feel drawn toward when you were in school?

OW: Well, we started off with, uh, a local, a Mrs. Brown's, uh, Grade School. And I ended up at the Champion Grade School, which was run by the Jesuit Priests of Boston. Graduated over to the high school, which was also run by the Jesuits and was the best high school in the country. And, um, we would, I was drawn I'd say mostly towards, um, technical things like chemistry, physics, math. Uh, my, um, writing and English were, um, less than okay.

00:05:10 TM: Well, and what, what would you say appealed to you about the chemistry and physics and math?

OW: Um, that came, I was curious about things, first of all. I used to get things like *Popular Mechanics*. And I'd say, um, I, I loved to see how things worked. I, um, my, uh, I had a [unknown], a bike. I'd break 'em down right to the very minimal, uh, integral parts and put 'em back together. Maintain them. Grease them. And I just loved to see how things work. So, that might've been, I was, um, I had hoped to be a, a little more, um, what's the word? Um, manly and smooth. According to the British system. But it came painfully. [Chuckles]

00:05:48 TM: And when you were growing up in Jamaica, um, would you say beer was part of your family's social life? Or the social life of your community around you?

OW: Uh, no. Beer, actually, alcohol, I'm the only one in my family of five children and two parents that tolerates alcohol. Um, they, the rest whenever they've tried it had pretty, uh, severe reactions. They got red or tipsy or just didn't feel well. And, I was the only one that could tolerate it. And I, I never figured out why. But, um, we were given, uh, when I was about eleven I think, my dad

thought, he would cook on Sundays some huge, you know, the seven kid, I mean, seven of us in the family, plus an uncle, two grandmothers, and a friend. It would be twelve to fourteen to fifteen people, every Sunday for brunch. And he would have fried prawns and roast duck and roast pork and, uh, many, many dishes. And his idea was to balance out what's considered hot foods, which are fried and roasted meats, you had something to cool it, which would include either a couple ounces of beer or a couple ounces of hard cider. And it turns out that I was the only one that could tolerate it. And, um, I'd end up drink some of my siblings'. And he found out about it and then he quit doing that.

TM: [Laughs] And do you recall what, what were the brands of beer that, that were served there?

OW: Uh, definitely Red Stripe beer. And actually, later on in high school, we would occasionally, my family actually would provide some Guinness mixed with condensed milk. So, it was like a, a sweet coffee, you know, bittersweet combination. Um, and sometimes beer with ginger ale, which was called a shandy. But even then, I was the only one in the family who got any of that.

00:08:06 TM: And, so, um, could you please describe what, how it came about that then you came to the United States to study at Notre Dame?

OW: Okay. Um, my dad came from China through the U.S. I guess it must have been on a train, I imagine. And he was so impressed with what he saw that even people who were so well off would actually clean their own homes. That was unheard of. And he always felt like, um, the American ingenuity and willing to do work and whatnot, no work was beneath them, um, meant a lot to him. So, all his life he thought, if at all possible, he'd really like to have us kids go to the U.S. So, being the firstborn son, um, and the star of the show, [Chuckles] I was the logical one. And in fact, he was rather proud of the fact that, um, his extended family of cousins were even, what's the word? Um, they were much more well-off than we were. They were wholesalers, and we were retailers. And, uh, they were somewhat older and much more well-off. But, he always said, "You know what? You're the first in the whole extended family to go off to college. And I'm proud of you." And, um, I'd hear him tell his friends that, "Yeah, they're richer, but they're kids aren't as smart." [Chuckles]

00:09:40 TM: And so, what are your memories of arriving in Indiana at Notre Dame? Uh, your first impressions?

OW: Well, um, at first I was fortunate, um, my roommate was also from Jamaica. And his sister lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan. So, we ended up in Grand Rapids for two weeks before going to college to get a chance to acclimate and, um, I, I think, um, it was just, everything was, was fantastic. It was new, different. And I was willing to learn and I found it, um, just interesting and fascinating. And I loved it. And I just had, would learn new stuff every day. Every single day.

00:10:26 TM: Okay. And so, in terms of your path, your education, and then your, your career before beer, you had clearly a full career before beer. What was that like and where did it take you in the world?

OW: Um, I graduated in civil engineering. And the university offered me an assistantship to get my master's in structural engineering. That was one of my prouder moments to write back to my dad and say, "I'm going on to my master's. And you don't have to send another penny. You're off the hook." Um, I would say that part of it was my, um, I wasn't quite ready to work every day. And school was still a lot of fun. And they were gonna pay for it. I couldn't pass it up. So, it was during those grad school days that I learned about beer. Beermaking, that is. Um, I remember walking through the, um, mechanical engineering lab and the custodian, Joe, pulls out his Pepsi bottle, and then my friend and I looked over and said, "Joe, that's not Pepsi!" He said, "What is that?" And, the rest is history. We, he gave us a recipe and we ran down to Sears and got the, all the accoutrements and started brewing. It was terrible stuff, but, if you could get to the third bottle it was fine.

TM: [Chuckles] So, he, you, this man you saw. He was drinking homebrewed beer?

OW: Yes.

TM: Okay.

OW: It was in a Pepsi bottle.

TM: Yeah.

OW: And it was about the color, a light lager color. It wasn't water. [Chuckles]

00:12:05 TM: Right. And when you began to homebrew, what styles did you start with? Or would you say the appeal was about, flavor and taste? Or was it also a fascination with making something?

OW: Well, um, we be-, bought a lot of beer in our time. And, uh, [unintelligible]. You say style of beer. That, that's, that, that's giving it a lot more, um, credence than it deserves. It was, um, actually it wasn't even beer, um, beer yeast. It was Fleischmann's bread yeast. Malt, sugar, and in fact the first batch we made we forgot the hops and we drank it anyway. We, we called it Champale.

TM: [Chuckles]

OW: And, um, it was alcohol on the cheap. So, you know, asking me what kind of style is it is giving it way more credit than it has.

00:13:07 TM: Alright. Alright, and I'll ask one more question before I ask Leah some questions. Um, the, the outlines of your engineering career before you came to Asheville, where did you work and what kinds of work did you do?

OW: Okay. I started off in Boston working on civil engineering projects. Like, um, highways and dams and. And then after two and a half years, went to San Francisco and worked in the nuclear industry in a, on a structural aspect of nuclear power plants. And, um, I continued in that and from the structures we went towards the mechanical systems and I continued on and got a job in, um, to start a division in New York. Still in the nuclear business. And then I started my own in 1978 doing, actually, doing analysis of safety systems in nuclear power plants. And then I ended up, um, starting my own company and then gravitating towards nuclear waste because they weren't building new nuclear plants. And, it, it was no sense, uh, the kind of work I was doing really required new plants. And then, um, so I successfully sold the business in 1987, and they kept me on until 1990, in Charlotte, North Carolina. At that point, they moved the operation to California. And, at that time, being a fifty-year-old washed up engineer, they didn't have any room for me. So, I was just cast adrift. And that's my story.

00:14:55 TM: Okay. And I'll ask one more. What made you decide to come to Asheville for your retirement? What you thought would be your retirement?

OW: Actually, yeah. Living, living in Charlotte, we actually bought a place in Asheville. And for two years had both places. Just, the intent was to retire up here, 'cause we love coming up here to hike and just enjoy the outdoors. So, and uh, when Leah first arrived to see what we bought up in the mountains, she couldn't believe that we went through a mobile park, mobile home park, and, in the back woods, right in the, uh, really in the woods. And, and then we had this little shack of a building up on the mountainside. Turns out she ended up appreciating what it was, and we lived there for about eight years. So, that's when Leah gets into the picture. [Chuckles]

00:15:51 TM: Alright. Great. That's a good segue. Alright, so, Leah, I'll ask you these biographical questions, too. When and where were you born?

Leah Wong Ashburn: I was born April 22, 1970, in San Francisco.

TM: And, I know your, father's name. What are your parents' names and I'll ask you what they did when you were growing up.

LA: My parents are Oscar and Anna Wong.

TM: And, Oscar was an engineer of course. And what did your mom do while you were growing up?

LA: My mom held the [chuckles] the coveted title of homemaker. So, she raised me and my sister. She was a teacher before my parents married. And probably a great one. Um. My sister has some developmental disabilities, and so between she and I being just eighteen months apart, I think we kept mom very, very busy for many years.

TM: And so, where did you grow up?

LA: We left San Francisco after just a couple years and went to New Jersey. And we were, so I had this sort of suburban New Jersey life. We were maybe thirty minutes from New York City and had access to everything New York had to offer, which I thought was scary as a child. And my parents thought was really exciting. So, they would drive me kicking and screaming to the museums in New York that I would now die to walk into. [Laughter] And, from New Jersey we went to Charlotte when I was fifteen years old. That's when dad, let's see, dad's headquarters for the engineering company moved from New Jersey to Charlotte, if I remember correctly.

OW: Right.

TM: And.

LA: And, then I was in Charlotte for the longest period of my life. Twenty-seven years. And came to Asheville in 2012 full-time.

00:17:54 TM: And when you were growing up and then starting school, how would you describe your general memories of the neighborhood where you lived and things that you ate and drank at home as a kid?

LA: [Laughs] I, I've always loved where I lived. It was idyllic in New Jersey. I could bike to my friends' houses, across town to a movie theater, to ice cream, anything I wanted to do. We had friends in the neighborhood. Just a whole bunch of kids that would run around like a pack of wolves. So, my, my parents always chose places that were really suitable for us kids. And I remember mom and dad entertaining. They've always entertained. And, having beer tastings. I remember on fancy nights, we would have beers like Heineken and Dos Equis in the fridge. And I knew if there were both of those in the fridge, it was gonna be a big party. [Laughs] So, it was well before the time that craft beer was a term. And, um, my parents have always really appreciated food and then beverage and how those things married together. My mom's a great cook. Dad's a great cook, too. He cooked less because he was working a lot. Um, and, and some of those years had a long commute from New Jersey into New York City. Um, but they're both really talented people and interested in so many things. So, um, that, that interest they, they would share that interest and joy with friends.

00:19:30 TM: And where did you go to school? And what subjects did you feel drawn to study?

LA: Well, much to my father's dismay, I studied journalism. [Laughs] Um, which I loved. So, I, I thought for a minute about being an engineer. But, I ended up at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I have a bachelor's degree in journalism. And I actually used it afterward, which was a really tough thing to do when I got out of school in 1992. I found, um, a few smaller jobs and then worked in a, a printing company. And what, what I term educational sales. And, and I loved it. I had a great time in that job. And I kept an eye on the brewery the whole time. Dad and I kept talking for, I think we counted it up, Dad, I think it was sixteen years that we kinda kept checking in with each other. And turning each other down for jobs. [Laughs] Before the, before the timing was right for me to come to the, to Highland. And, that was in 2011.

00:20:40 TM: And so, in this initial chapter of your career, well, your, your first career, why did you feel drawn to these fields of journalism? And then to printing?

LA: I've always been an aspiring designer. And journalism, the, the writing, design, when those two things come together, I just love it. So, I discovered after school that I am better than maybe average at design. And I love it. But, probably not good enough or focused enough on it to make a living, solely on design. So, I've gotten to play with it and get a lot of joy out of that. Um, but, the beer interest. I've always loved beer, too. And started, you know, tinkering around, trying a couple different things. Drank cheap beer in college just like you're supposed to. And then started trying Highland beer and asking questions about the brewery. So, it just kind of was a continuous conversation and rising interest once I was learning more about what the brewery was. Which was more than beer.

00:21:51 TM: And so, would you say there was no real lightbulb moment where you realized that you wanted to work in beer or shift your life to beer. It was more of a kind of growing interest over time?

LA: I think that's correct. It was, I did ask for a job when I was much younger. And dad turned me down. And then I found that career. And about midway through that career I was really successful at it, but not, maybe not completely satisfied. And I didn't know exactly what I was looking for. Dad offered me a job. And I turned him down because it was only gonna pay a fraction of what I was making. And I wasn't ready to make that jump. So, it was years after that. Um, with continued conversation. Learning about the brewery and, and Dad really watching me, too, to make sure that it would be a good fit. Because if you're gonna enter a family business, there's a lot of things to consider. And, um, a lot to, uh, to, that needs to align well for it to work.

TM: So, you, you uh, both came together to the brewery when the time was exactly right, it sounds like. So, I.

LA: Something went right. I'm still here. He's still here. [Laughs]

00:23:09 TM: So, I would love to hear now about the founding of Highland, please. And, um, and from this point forward, please both of you feel free to answer these questions. But when, when Oscar, when you began to brew professionally, what was the beer scene like at the time locally and regionally, would you say?

OW: Well, um, Asheville had no breweries. And, um, it was, um, it's part of the Bible Belt, of course. And, we were the first legal brewery in Asheville since Prohibition. I say legal because I assure you there'd been beer brewed illegally before, during, and since. But, that's all part of the lore of this area of the country. And, um, it was a difficult start in trying to convince, um, the regulatory folks about starting up a brewery. Um, right downtown. What would the smell be like? And, what, um, how dangerous is it? You're gonna actually be having big flames cooking stuff? And, it, it was, um, an interesting exercise where the, um, the structural, mechanical, uh, fire safety, electrical—they're all at odds with each other. And we were caught in between. So, it was questioned. Then we got started and we made the beer. And then we had to go convince people. Um, I'd get comments from my friends, you know. One of 'em said, we had a party and I brought little, oh, four-, five-gallon little Cornelius keg as they'd call it, and, he said, "Oscar, you're gonna go broke trying to sell this stuff." So, that's kind of, um, experience we had.

00:25:05 TM: Well, and with no, with no legal brewery since Prohibition, what gave you the inspiration or convinced you that you wanted to open a brewery?

OW: Well, um, actually, it came by accident because after selling my engineering business and resigning in Charlotte, we then had, as I said, this other place up in Asheville. For two years we had them both. And, um, I was introduced to an award-winning brewer who wanted to start a brewery, but needed some business experience, some financial backing, and some knowledge of regulatory dealings, which I had that really well done, dealing with the nuclear regulatory commission. So, it was a, a good fit. And, um, Leah's mom was ecstatic. I had been home for four years at that point. And so, that's how it got started. And so, we got it going and then, uh, at one point, um, my wife said, "Well, why do we keep going back to Charlotte every Sunday night?" And, "Well, that's where we live." And, you know, "But you're starting a business up in Asheville. And you don't have, you don't have any business in Charlotte at all. Why do you have to go back there?" So, so, okay, we can live in this cabin for a while and, uh, we'll build a house eventually. And, we ended up living in it for eight years. It was fun.

TM: And so, what year was it when the brewery opened?

OW: The brewery opened in 1994. We bought our home in Asheville, well, that mountain cabin in '92. So, at the point that we opened that same year, later on in

that year, we just decided to sell our Charlotte home and live in the cabin until we could settle down. It was a healing thing for both of us because I started building rock walls and my wife was gardening, and we just kind of went back to the woods.

00:27:24 TM: Well, and it, one more question in terms of the process of opening, you know, I've spoken with several brewers who started early microbreweries on the west coast in California, like Jack McAuliffe and Ken Grossman, and you hear them talk about, you know, needing to explain what they were doing in order to get a brewing license or, you know, welding together old dairy equipment or winemaking equipment. And, I'm curious if you have any sense, I mean, how similar, what the similarities and differences were in terms of your experience of, of starting this in a very new place in a new setting, and probably doing some of the same things. But, there was a microbrewing, craft brewing scene in the country, uh, growing at the time. So, I'm not sure if you have any sense of how similar or different your experiences were?

OW: There, there are a lot of similarities in the sense that, um, although there, the craft brewing industry had taken off all over the country, the last area that embraced it is the Southeast. So, there was a lot of history behind it. At the same time, we did start off with dairy tanks. Dairies were going out of business. The tanks were cheap. And we just worked with it. And we ran into the same situation where, uh, people down here didn't know what craft breweries were. Craft beer was, um, homebrew swill, from their term, you know. So, it took a while. We used to run around town with, um, a little tiny keg in the trunk of the car and just go and, uh, my, my initial partner, John and I would go into the restaurants and, or in a pub, uh, "Hey, we're making some beer. Wanna taste it?" "Sure." And, uh, we'd run back to the car and get two little containers and go in and talk about the beer and so forth. Um, let me hasten to add that all the things we were doing were highly illegal by federal and state standards. However, it's over twenty-three years ago and it's, statute of limitations I think, we're, we're home free.

TM: And so, when you opened, what was your vision for what you wanted the brewery to be in terms of the name of the brewery, the kind of beer you wanted to brew?

OW: Theresa, we, I lose you every now and then. Um.

TM: Oh. Okay.

OW: Do you find the same thing Leah?

00:29:48 TM: I'm sorry. Um. I'm asking, when you opened the brewery, what would you say your vision is of what you wanted the brewery to be? What kind of beer you wanted to brew?

OW: My thought at the time was we would end up in Asheville with about two or three little breweries, like they have in Europe. And that we would be one of the hometown brews. And that I'd have my personal watering hole that I could come to. And, um, that was it. That's all I had in mind. Um, it was something to keep me busy. Um, keep my, um, my wife sane, since I was out of the house enough. Stay out of her hair. And, but, being this is America, [unintelligible] just took off like wildfire. One after the other. And the competition's gotten, you know, pretty, pretty rough. But we had to up our game to survive.

00:30:49 TM: And, so, when you were starting, and Leah, you can answer this too, at the time when you joined the brewery, what would you each say were the biggest challenges?

OW: Mute. Leah, mute. Unmute.

TM: Oops. Sorry.

OW: Leah? Unmute.

TM: What would you say were the biggest challenges for each of you when you started out at the brewery?

LA: Um, I'll, yeah, I'll jump in. My, my biggest challenge when I started at the brewery was learning how to work within a team, because I had been an independent contractor for thirteen years. So, even copying the right people on an email was sort of a mystery. I didn't understand the domino effect. And the interconnectedness in a company that had manufacturing, sales, um, a fledgling marketing effort at the time, and, um. So, I, it was, at times painful, when I didn't relay important information to people who needed to know it in order to do their jobs well. Um, there were many other pieces. There was so much learning and there, and there still is. But that one was probably the first tough lesson to learn.

00:32:06 TM: And Oscar? What would you say about, something challenging at the start of your brewing career?

OW: I would say the acceptance of our beer was a big part, because, um, people were not familiar with the idea of craft beer in this area. Um, the regulatory requirements for local folks, um, was not too easy. Getting the federal license wasn't as difficult because that had been going on for several years. It was more of the state and local people who had no idea of what we were doing. Or, uh, and weren't that eager actually, because I will say that in the first few years in the newspaper, locally, it was, um, there were some letters to the editor talking about me doing the devil's work. So, it was a little sketchy. And so, the acceptance by the regulatory folks, the customers, distributors, all along the line, it was an uphill battle.

00:33:14 TM: And as you were each working through various challenges, would you say you each had, who were your inspirations or your mentors as you got more into the brewing? The work of brewing?

OW: Well, I, I was very fortunate that, uh, to begin with, the, um, I had met a cadre of folks and had breakfast meetings at about 6:30 on Wednesday mornings every week. And they turned out to be the local politicians, uh, Democrats all, and because they were the, the power group here, and I got introduced to them and, um, it was a, a great introduction to, to how things work in this city. Um, and beyond that, we were fortunate in coming across a distributor who believed in us, got us started. Um, in fact he just retired off of our company. We ended up having him work here. Uh, Chuck Whitehead. And, um, he's retired this, uh, on December 31. So, I guess I, I don't know that I've answered your question, but.

TM: Yes. Yes. Yes. And Leah, how about?

00:34:33 LA: My mentor was dad. Um, you know. He has really big, he left me really big shoes to fill at Highland. And, did such a wonderful job establishing Highland as a company that, that people could trust. That, a company that would be a good neighbor when there were questions around whether a brewery could be a good neighbor. And he's so involved in community efforts and is a delight for everybody to meet. So, I, I still aspire to, um, to follow in the footsteps in many ways. And have also found out that I have to do it my way at the same time. And it, it's just going to be different. But, his leadership, his, um, example set has been wonderful for me, uh, while my mom plays my mental health monitor.

[Laughter]

00:35:29 TM: And Leah, you alluded to this a little earlier. But, um, what were the conditions that finally made it right for you to join Highland?

OW: It wasn't money, for sure. [Chuckles]

LA: It, it wasn't money. It's still not. [Chuckles]

LA: It was a combination of factors where my satisfaction in my career at the time was waning. I think that it had gotten to a point where my patience was being tested more than my intellect. So, a new challenge felt like the, the timing was good. And I met my husband to be, Brock, and he is a beer fan. I met him at a beer dinner because he was a very frequent customer at a local beer store. And when we, so we got serious, we got engaged, and talked about the brewery all the time. And I have this opportunity to work at the brewery and he said, "That is the coolest thing that is ever going to happen. You have to do it." [Laughs] And I said, "Well, my income's gonna be cut by two thirds. And I don't know anything about the brewery, how to work there. I've been working on my own for so long." And he just said, "We'll figure it out. We'll, we'll do it. This is worth it. Highland

is a great place. It's a special place and you're the next generation. So, let's give it a try."

OW: I will say that I thank Brock all the time for being the catalyst to bring it up. It's a, I called Leah one time and I said, "My, um, my guess is that you're getting conversations like, uh, from Brock, like, 'So, you're not interested in taking over the family business? Highland Brewing? Are you nuts?'" And Leah laughed and said, "Oh my god, almost word for word."

LA: Yep. [Chuckles]

00:37:30 TM: Well, and, and that's a question for both of you. What has it been like to, to mix family and business, family and work? Um, what kinds of, uh, boundaries have you had to set? Or, what are your experiences like at home and at work?

OW: Leah. Your turn.

LA: Yeah. I think it's, it's a great question because I think the answer is so unusual. Oscar Wong is not one who needs to control things. And so, typically in a second generation, there's a sort of power struggle. And instead, our story has been more like, Dad joyfully throwing me the reins before I felt like I was ready. And saying that any decision that I made would be okay. And he wouldn't let me make a fatal error. I mean, he's going to kind of, he's there as much as I, as I want him to be. And he will jump in if he sees me doing something that's completely off the rails. But, I have been given such a wide berth. And such an opportunity to sort of make the brewery mine as, which is exactly what he's been asking me to do for years. Saying, "It's okay." Like, you, you are going to do this differently and, and the brewery becomes an expression, it's still an expression of Oscar Wong and my family. And me. And so, there's this evolution that he was completely comfortable with. And what an amazing thing that is.

00:39:03 TM: And I'll ask quickly, what would you say are some of the changes or the evolutions that have happened since you have joined?

LA: It seems like we're in fast forward all the time. But, I think the two biggest things I would call to, well, I just changed it to three, the beer portfolio has changed dramatically. And I'm not a brewer, so that, it's not been up to me. But, I think we've opened ourselves up to brewing different styles, updating the portfolio. So, now over half of what we make is IPAs. And we were not an IPA brewery, certainly not an American IPA brewery, five years ago. We also grew tremendously in hospitality, so we just built volleyball courts and we're talking about other ideas. We're talking about a disc golf course. We have trails at the brewery. So, um, private event rooms. We just built a, a second space that is beautiful. So, inviting more people to come to the brewery and experience, um, Asheville and our hilltop and, and see our staff there and gather with other people. And then the brand is the third huge element. We changed that in 2018. And it

was very scary to change the face of the company that had been in place since 1994. And dad gave me full rein on that one as well. So, we went, we did, um, I thought it would be a moderate change. Something that would just freshen it up a little bit. And we ended up doing a revolutionary change. And it was terrifying and it was every bit worth it. I'm absolutely delighted that we did it.

00:40:52 TM: Great. Great. And Oscar, I'll ask you the question about blending work and family life. What has that been like for you?

OW: It's always been easy for me because, uh, my wife kind of picked up the reins at home. And, and now with Leah, and Leah actually put me off for a year and a half to become president. Uh, finally, I said, "Look, you know, this is time. It's on the docket for the board meeting and I've talked to each one of them individually and prepped them and it's all a done deal." And then, um, then Leah said, "Okay. That will be. How about my birthday? October?" "Okay." And then when time came she said, "Let's make it January 1st." I said, "That's final. That's it." And, um, I've always been comfortable and confident in her gut instincts that she wasn't gonna do something crazy. Um, she would consult with people. Not necessarily me, but, get input from all sides. So, and, um, my own background and history is that my dad was looking for my input when I was a sophomore in college about moving from Jamaica to London. So, it's, I, I don't, you don't need to be meticulously in charge of every little detail. Just, I said, you might make mistakes. You will make mistakes. If you're not making them, it's because you're not making any decisions. So, just have at it and make it your own. And I think that's something she took a long time to figure out. "What does he mean by making it my own?" And she now knows. I think she understands it.

00:42:29 TM: Great. Alright, I, I have a few questions about the beer and brewing at Highland. And so, um, how would you describe the, the line-up of beers when you opened Highland and then your current line-up of beers?

OW: Uh, we started off with English-style ales. They took less time. Um, lagers take, you know, another fifty to a hundred percent longer to make. And, uh, ales were relatively easier to make. Um, uh, more forgiving if you mess up, actually. But, from there, as Leah said, it's only in the last five to six years that we have morphed into more of, um, a modern craft brewery with IPAs and lagers and, well, you know, all kinds of styles. And, but each one done carefully. It's one of the things that we've all agreed on, that we don't jump on the latest bandwagon of, you know, this kind of beer, this kind of style. We will really do it internally and study it for a long time before we release it to the public. In fact, we dumped a lot of beer in the beginning because, it was drinkable, but I thought we would look embarrassed if we wanted to charge people for it, you know? So, um, so, quality's always been a basic, like Ken Grossman and everybody else that's successful, you can't compromise on quality.

00:44:04 TM: And so, Leah, you mentioned that more than half of your current lineup is IPAs. What are the, how would you describe, if I walked into the taproom today, what would I see on offer?

LA: You'd be very lonely if you walked into the taproom today because we are closed because of the pandemic.

[Laughter]

TM: Yes. Yes.

LA: Um, but aside from that.

TM: Yes.

LA: You would see a balance of our year-round and seasonal beers on one side of the tap wall. And then you would see another selection of pilot beers on the other side. So, our, our big system, we're making beers that we put into distribution, basically. And so those are the beers that you can get in stores. And then on the other side, they come from our three-barrel pilot system. This is where we're experimenting. This is where we are testing ingredients. We are developing recipes. We are, um, letting the staff and the public taste those test rounds and we get feedback and go and do it again until we feel like we've got just the right body and aroma and flavor and finish and all of the characteristics we're looking for. So, it's a really, um, ever-changing and fun thing to come in and have twenty options in front of you. And have a staff member happy to guide you through and see what other things you might like, and, and if you wanna try something that's familiar or something that, you know, would completely blow your mind even exists as a beer. Sometimes those are the most fun things to do.

00:45:39 TM: And can you think of examples of beers that have started on the pilot system that have become, you know, kind of entered into your primary, line-up? Or, or have become bigger, more popular?

LA: Yes. Pretty much everything that we have in distribution right now, that has been developed over the last five years, started in the pilot room. So, there might be one version of it, rarely, if ever, let's say two to three versions on the pilot room before it is scaled up to the big system. Or there could be well over a dozen. There might be twenty. And we, we might find, you know, switch out an ingredient, change the balance, and, and, you know, sometimes that perfection in our mind is really hard to find. Might feel like a needle in a haystack, um. By the time we do it, there's such elation around the entire staff. There's such pride in releasing that beer. The most recent one is called Rising Haze. And we actually released it during the pandemic. So, a digital release, we called it. Instead of having a party at the brewery in the taproom. We talked about it on Facebook Live, as we talk about a lot of things on Facebook Live during the pandemic. And

it was sent out to stores through our distributor partners. And people could just buy it right there. And, and it's, it's gone really well. The beer's done beautifully for us.

00:47:07 TM: Great. Great. And now, you mentioned earlier the Highland brand and changing the brand and the aesthetic. How would you describe the Highland brand—its visual look, but also what it means to consumers?

LA: The Highland brand today is a call to our pioneering spirit. So, that has two levels. One is the Scots-Irish history in the area. And that's where we got our name Highland, from the Scottish Highlands. And the other is Oscar Wong. One of the pioneers in the craft brewing industry. So, um, the, the graphic itself is a simplified compass that calls to that pioneering spirit. It's also, it's also clean. It's, um, it's clear and direct and, and brightly colored so it gets, it has some energy to it. And also has some clarity. And I love all of those elements.

00:48:07 TM: Great. I'm curious about your, you have grown very much as a brewery over the last several decades and are now one of the largest in the, in the Southeast, in the eastern part of the, the U.S. Um, what has been your attitude toward growth during a very competitive time? Your strategy for growth now and going forward?

LA: Growth for growth's sake has never been something that drove dad. I think I'm speaking correctly for you, dad.

OW: You are.

LA: Good. Uh, and hasn't really driven me either. Um, it's healthy to grow. You certainly, if you're standing still, then you're going to end up losing in a really competitive environment. But, there are different ways to grow. And different rates. So, I have been very focused on selling beer where we matter. And being the largest brewery is not something that appeals to me. Being a brewery that has, that has meaning, that is tied to its roots, which means the Southeast, and the connection to its Scots-Irish history, to the Southern Appalachians. That has great appeal to me. And I think that our future can be tied heavily to that history. And also to our location. We're so fortunate to be on a hilltop in this beautiful city that attracts people from all over the country and all over the world. It's a really small place of 90,000 people. But, it's got some kind of magic that has been here for well over a century. And still draws people. Especially now during the pandemic. So, I think that we have a great future ahead of us that, that has a balance of distributing beer where we matter and inviting people to where we live. And that balance may change over time in different directions. But I think those two elements are the key to our future.

00:50:21 TM: And that leads to another question I had which is about your location. And, again, I have travelled and spoken with brewers about this kind of allure of

Northern California, but I see something very similar in play in Asheville, which has become an epicenter of craft brewing in the U.S. And I think much of that is, is thanks to Highland and your early influence. But, you know, I'm just curious what are the ingredients you see in, in the magic that is Asheville in terms of, uh, you know its popularity for beer? Is it culture? Is it geography? Is it economy? All those things?

LA: I think it's all of those things. There, dad saw a spark here. Even before the brewery opened. And one of the reasons that the brewery opened in Asheville, there were two *Wine Spectator* awards in a town where there was almost nothing going on. [Chuckles] And, he thought, you know, how, how can that be? That there's such a high level of appreciation for great wine? And then there was great food attached to that. And just these very, very few places. So, that spark of, um, appreciating food and beverage was there. It's also tied to the history of craft in the area. It runs very deep. HandMade in America is a national movement that was born in Asheville by a lovely woman that we all know, Becky Anderson. She's amazing. And the craft school [Penland School of Craft] is here. The, um, just fine art, artisan communities and the River Arts District. I think that ties really well to craft beer. Pride in making something. Being connected to what you're making. It's a big part of craft beer. And, so, it all just tied together, along with amazing geography in this lush environment that is actually part rainforest here. Things love to grow here. And we have beautiful water in the mountains. So, it's really all the best characteristics for a craft brewer.

00:52:39 TM: Well put. Alright, I'll shift gears a little bit and acknowledge the very unusual time that we're speaking in. We're talking at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the American brewing industry. And it's been nearly ten months now since the pandemic has drastically changed how Americans work and how we socialize. And so, could you please describe what your brewery looked like a year ago? Say, January of 2020, compared to what it looks like today?

LA: A year ago, in January, we were planning the Chinese New Year's celebration that was coming up soon. We were, taproom was open. We had pilot beers, year-round beers. Maybe the, hopefully the decorations from, from the holidays had come down, but we might have some remnants. And we were open seven days a week. Today, the taproom is completely closed. We don't even have vendors come in the building unless there's something that needs to be fixed that is broken. Um, but we have no guests. There are no taps running. Our staff is not allowed to stay for beers, which they usually do. And we, which usually is something that we value. We love that they want to stay after they work and have a beer with their co-workers. So, um, right now it is, um, devoid of people. But not devoid of activity. We're using the time that we're closed to do some improvements to the taproom. So, cutting in skylights and doing some cleaning and painting the ceiling. Things that we can't do when we do have guests. So, at

least using the time wisely and looking forward to reopening. But we haven't even set a date because things are so uncertain right now.

00:54:34 TM: And, can you recall, when the pandemic arrived in your area, what were the initial days and weeks like for you? What kinds of changes did you make to your operations? But also, how would you describe your emotional reactions to what was happening?

LA: We were shut down on March 17. And I think we decided to shut down the day before we were mandated to shut down by the state. Which was a good decision. Um, we planned really quickly how to reopen when we could reopen. We were closed for two and a half months. And reopening, we knew would have, would require many different practices. So, we put in freestanding sinks in every guest area, outside and inside the brewery. We got, bought touchless payment systems. We put up plastic shields. We sourced masks that were really hard to find for a time. Bought a ton more rubber gloves. Found, um, sanitizer. Um, gave that to our sales team, because we've got some folks that are outside of the brewery in different markets. And shipped them gloves and sanitizer and masks. So, it was, um, it was a time though when I could focus, so there's a lot going on every single day at the brewery under normal circumstances. And sometimes it can be a bit much. So, I was, even though it was a horrible time and a very scary time, I was grateful that everything was simplified. And I could focus completely on learning about the pandemic and trying to find our path forward. Because there's no right or wrong way to do things. It's, it's how you are going to find a way that fits your company and your staff and your customers. So, I and a whole lot of other people at Highland dove into that a hundred percent. And, I'm really glad that we didn't have to focus on a hundred things like we normally do.

00:57:03 TM: And, over the last many months, how has your production changed? Whether in terms of the volume, and then also your distribution. How have those processes changed?

LA: We have, we have spoken to our staff really with care. Um, but with a lot of clarity about how important it is to not have spread at Highland. Um, some people are going to get sick. I mean, we, we're all human beings. And we have to interact at some level with other people. Um, so, all I asked of our staff was to be careful at work, because if we can't stay, if we can't keep brewing, we can't stay in business, and then I can't pay people. And I want them to be safe and working and paid. So, they've been, they've been pretty good about that. A few reminders about what six feet means when we're distancing. Um, but they want to be healthy, too. And they want to be paid. So, that's gone generally pretty well. Um, stumbling on the last part of your question, Theresa. I'm sorry.

TM: Oh just, um, about.

LA: Living through.

TM: Yeah.

LA: All of that stuff.

TM: Right.

LA: Is, is, was really, it's, it's been a lot.

TM: Sure.

LA: And so.

00:58:26 TM: Well, and I think I'm curious, have you had to downscale your production? And how has your distribution changed?

LA: Right. Watching our, our distribution and our production has been fascinating, because, of course we lost all of the restaurant and bar business overnight. And there are a couple of times when reopening happened on a certain level. But then a shutdown would follow it. Or at least enough fear would follow it, because trends would decline in health. So, we have, um, gone from, um, about, I don't know a third of our business in kegs, less than a third, to almost nothing. We have made so much more packaged beer, especially in twelve-packs, the larger packages. People have been really looking for value and to go to the store as little as possible. So, they buy bigger packages in twelve-, fifteen-, twenty-four packs. And that takes more people on our side. So, that in a way has been good. We've been able to keep people working, um, just changing what they do. And, we had, um, a huge dip March and April, and mostly May, were, were terrible. But, we sold a lot of beer in package in the following months. Quarter three was great for us. Um, quarter four was really good. So, because of that balance that we have of, um, taproom, business, and distribution, we are able to, um, counter a little bit here and, and still work through it. And we're, we're doing really well. So, we're hopeful that we can have everybody back, uh, in coming months. But, we'll only do it when it feels right for us. And, um, have been really grateful for everybody going to the grocery store in the meantime.

01:00:28 TM: Good. Alright, I'll wrap up now with a few bigger picture questions. Just about your experiences in beer and about your thoughts about the industry in general. It is undeniable that demographically speaking, the American brewing industry is not diverse. Oscar, you recognize that when you received the Brewers Association Recognition Award, you were the first person of color to win that award. And so I'm hoping you could each please talk about your experiences, being of Chinese heritage, Oscar, being raised in Jamaica, Leah of course, as a woman in the craft beer industry, and how your experiences have changed over time?

OW: I guess it's, um, that's a tough question because, because of my temperament. I just roll along with what's going on. And, I, I don't get in too much of a deep dive about the whys and wherefores. We see it as it is and we work with what it is. But, um, I, I understand that there are a lot of concerns, um, in the national psyche about, you know balancing things out. And I, I don't totally agree with, uh, forced balance. I mean, I mean, I, opportunities? Yes. I, I think people should be, uh, not be denied opportunities to get started. But, um, some of the things that we do today about, um, if we have ten percent of this kind, and fifteen percent, that's what should be reflected in our political scene, in our business scene, in our—that's crazy. It doesn't make sense. So, I, I, I just think that merit comes first. But then, opportunities should also be equal. But, to force fit in the craft brewing. It, it'll come around. It, it, just take a while. Um, we have tried. We, we, we have tried for minorities in our system. And it's not easy. Um, we, we've reached out. We've had people in here. And unfortunately, it doesn't work out. They, they, the, the one that we had that worked out got poached by a richer company.

[Laughter]

OW: I mean, what are you gonna do? Anyway, that's my take on it. Leah, you? [unintelligible]

01:03:01 LA: Well, I think it's important to point out that, um, there are differences in levels of marginalization. So, I would never pretend that being, I, um, a person of tint, um, who is female, could, would have the same experience as someone who is of male or female Black American. Um, but I, I think there's something about craft beer that has been driven by counterculture. And, I think the idea of counterculture might not be welcoming to marginalized groups who are seeking acceptance for who they are. And it, it's a, it's a guess. Um, and I think I will do what I can to ensure that Highland is welcoming. That, um, that our brewery is doing the right thing. Um, so we've made, we've done some really exciting things. We had a speaker come during the pandemic that I'm so proud of. Dr. J, who lives in Richmond, and is the Brewers Associations Diversity Ambassador. And she spoke at our brewery, and I was just so honored, um. And, and I will continue to have conversations about race at Highland and certainly not force our staff to be whatever "balanced" might mean. Not, I'm not even sure what that would mean. Um, but we're in a really white city in a really white industry. So, um, those are two challenges. But, we'll continue to make efforts. And I think keeping the conversation alive is one of the things that, that I'm committed to. And our staff understands.

01:04:55 TM: Great. Great. And, what, how would you, your experiences as a woman working in beer, have you considered, have you found that challenging in any way? Or, um, how would you describe that?

LA: My experience as a woman in craft beer has been great. I work for a well-respected company. I was preceded by one of the most well-respected people in

the industry. And I have, I have been verbally pat on the head by a few people here and there. But I can take that. [Laughs] It's not, it does, it doesn't slow me down there, I, I can, I can be effective with, you know, with that happening here and there. And, um, and I don't pretend that, that I can brew or that I can run this brewery by myself. And so, I think having, having the kind of a group approach to, um, to where we can all be effective, helps me be where I can be effective and helps other folks pitch in where they can, too.

01:06:06 TM: Great. Okay, a question about consumers. You know, thinking about consumer tastes now and then in the future. What do you feel like consumers want in beer? What are they looking for when they walk into your taproom when it's open or when they shop for your beer at the store?

LA: I think consumers want a good company in all senses of the word. So, that means a responsible company. It means a company that's, that's aware. That is connected to the community. That is honest. That makes a quality product that they can trust. So, that's, um, that's something that takes every day to build. You have to earn that kind of trust every day. It's very easy to lose. It can be lost in a heartbeat. And I just mentioned that in our Monday morning meeting. Um, so, we've all worked really hard on that. And, but it definitely goes beyond the quality of the product. And into the practices of the company. And I love that. I think that that should matter.

01:07:20 TM: And Oscar, with your very long view of the industry, how have you seen, consumer, beer lovers tastes change over time? Either from a, a flavor perspective or from their kind of relationship to a company?

OW: It, it's waxed and waned a bit. It started out that we had an uphill battle trying to get them to drink craft beer, 'cause they were used to the standard. And, we kept going up the hill, stronger, more potent. And more flavorful. And it kind of crashed in a little bit. And backing off, we're, some of our best sales are very sessionable, easy-drinking, wouldn't put you on your butt after two or three beers. And, I bet those seltzers tells you something. That is blowing up everywhere. Now, that doesn't mean we're going to, you know, jump into seltzers. We've decided not to. We, we won't do it. But, uh, it just tells you that it goes back again to a lighter drinking, easier drinking beer, uh, that has flavor, and it's not too intense. There'll be another wave as it goes back around and people say, "Well, you know, we kind of, we kind of like that kick to it." It, it'll change over time. It, it's like, um, designing clothes. I have ties that I keep for twenty, thirty years, because they come back in fashion.

[Laughter]

OW: It gets wide. It gets narrow. It gets wide again. The skirts go up and down.

[Laughter]

OW: So, that's how I see it. Life is like a big circle, over and over.

01:09:05 TM: Okay. And so, then again still thinking about the future, you know, I like to ask brewers what you think the craft industry will be like in five, ten, fifteen years. You know, the answers to this question were very different when I would record an interview like this a year ago than now. And so, you know, in our position now, what do you see coming for craft beer, would you say?

OW: That's for Leah.

LA: [Laughs]

OW: I'm, I'm out.

LA: Well, the pandemic certainly has a great effect. So, I'm reading that fewer brewers have closed than were expected by this time. But, I do think that we're gonna lose more small craft brewers who are dependent on their taprooms for business. And, on a larger scale, um, with or without a pandemic, I, I feel like there will be fewer regional and large brewers. I think that there are too many that are seeking to be national, international, just, bigger, bigger, bigger. Too many in that race. And I don't know that they can all make it. Um. So, the, the growth, the, that has been so rampant for the past several years, um, I think that there will be a chilling effect on that somewhat and we may lose some big players.

01:10:32 TM: Okay, I have one more question, and it's a simple one but kind of a big one. And so, it's to ask each of you what you would say you value most about what you do?

OW: Hmm. [Clears throat] When I was in engineering, particularly the nuclear engineering business, I was rather proud of what I did. And nobody cared. I got into the beer business, and now it's, I'm a big deal. So, I think what really makes it work for me is a connection with people. Um, the idea of having a, a social lubricant, is what I call it. And that we're a proud member of the community, you know, we've always been proud of Asheville. We wanted Asheville to be proud of us. And so, that's the big step for me in this business.

LA: Um, I think I value most the benefit of the energy around our fun and high quality product. What comes with that, perhaps, is out of proportion, but, it allows me to be visible in the community. And, I'm not attracted to, to power at all. But what it does is it makes me more connected to where I live. I get to speak with people that make big things happen. And inspiring folks. Sometimes there are people on our staff, I'm amazed at what our staff accomplishes. Sometimes it's our fans. And how much they love Highland. Sometimes it's legislators in the Asheville area or, or the state level. Um, that sort of experience, um, the breadth

of connection that the brewery has brought to me is, um, something I value the most and I am amazed by it.

TM: Wonderful. Alright. Well, thank you so much to both of you for your time. This has been a, a wonderful conversation.

OW: Thank you, Theresa. We are honored to be part of this. It's a big deal.

LA: Yeah. It feels really, really special. And, um, and you're lovely to talk with, so thank you for making it comfortable and, less intimidating. It's the Smithsonian! It's the most exciting thing, and, um, it kind of feels like we could be in my living room right now. So.

TM: Well, we are happy to have you, uh, in the collections. Absolutely.