

One & Only

Theresa McCulla
makes beer history less dusty
and more bubbly.

Theresa McCulla is the first, and so far only, person to do what she does. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History created a position called the Curator of the American Brewing History Initiative in 2016, and McCulla was hired soon after. Though she's too humble to state this plainly, McCulla is not only preserving and presenting history, but making it.

When her position was first announced, the public, and even the media, seemed slightly befuddled about what the role would entail. A website lauded her as “the Indiana Jones of beer history,” though McCulla is a scholar, curator, and researcher—not an archeologist. (“She’s not an archaeologist,” her former intern John Harry says. “She’s a historian.”)

Academic and archival work is by nature inscrutable to most of us; add the topic of alcohol to the mix, and people don't quite know what to make of McCulla's job title. Indeed, she says the new role gave her something like *carte blanche* to shape her own work. “The description of the position was a blank slate,” McCulla says of her role. “The American Brewing History

Initiative was formed as a project to document and collect the history of beer and brewing in the U.S., with a focus on craft brewing and homebrewing. I had the opportunity to shape the course of the initiative toward that goal.”

The Brewers Association, a trade group for breweries it defines as small and independent, funded the creation of the Smithsonian position with a goal of preserving the history of home brewing and the U.S. craft beer industry. The timing of this is critical: As the American craft beer industry matures, its earliest pioneers are aging, and their stories risk slipping out of the present tense. McCulla is there to make sure this vibrant, still-recent history isn't lost or misinterpreted.

Story by KATE BERNOT
Photo by SCOTT SUCHMAN



Theresa McCulla continued

To that end, McCulla has traveled the country and recorded more than 100 oral histories with those who've shaped the U.S. beer industry. She's collected and cataloged one-of-a-kind artifacts that tell the story of U.S. beer. She's given countless presentations and written articles about her work. She's adapting her Harvard PhD dissertation, "Insatiable City: Eating Food and Consuming People in New Orleans," into a forthcoming book. She also curated a permanent exhibit called *Brewing A Revolution* within the Smithsonian's larger food collection. But perhaps her greatest accomplishment is that her work legitimizes beer history as a subject of scholarship, attention, and intellectual rigor.

"It allows people to understand how important beer has been to community, to history, to the economy, to the growth of our country," says Liz Garibay, executive director of the Chicago Brewseum. "For the Smithsonian—the mother of all institutions—to acknowledge that beer mattered and beer history matters, that is a moment of victory and validation."

As part of her research and oral histories, McCulla has interviewed some of the marquee names in craft beer: Frederick (Fritz) Maytag III, former owner of Anchor Brewing; Kim Jordan, co-founder of New Belgium Brewing; and Michael Lewis, a preeminent brewing educator and founder of the Professional Brewing Programs at the University of California–Davis. But she's just as eager to illuminate the lives of people who aren't commonly included in history books—yet. These include Black pioneers in beer, as well as enslaved people who brewed. Earlier this year, McCulla won a James Beard Foundation Award for her article, "Patsy Young—American Brewer, Fugitive From Slavery," published by *Good Beer Hunting*. (Disclosure: The author of this piece is a reporter for *Good Beer Hunting*.) "The challenges in investigating these histories are the same in the realm of beer or the broader realm of history: It's often a case of less complete documentation. But I think that's a really great challenge to the historian," McCulla says.

Her illumination of the life of Patsy Young began with a single strand of information: a "runaway ad" seeking the return of an enslaved woman who had escaped, a woman described as "a good cake-baker and beer-brewer." From that haunting newspaper ad, McCulla began to unspool the story of a brave, skilled woman, one detail at a time. "In the ad there were so many names and dates and places—anything like that is a little foothold to jump from one question to another or one source to another," McCulla says. "It's an exciting way to research and the stories that can be told are, I think, so gratifying."

This type of scholarship wouldn't have happened just decades ago. Garibay, who has worked in museums since she was 15 years old, says that in her experience it wasn't until recently that academia and museums began to view alcohol as a topic worthy of research. And it wasn't until recently, too, that the arena of beer history began to look beyond the white male heroes the industry venerated. This is one of the critical lessons John Harry learned while interning for McCulla at the Smithsonian in 2019. "She is revolutionizing the way that beer history is approached," Harry says. "Even if you've never drank in your life, these stories are really important from an innovation standpoint and for how we approach things like gender, race, and class. Now, beer is something that can tell that story to a larger audience."

Most people don't find oil paintings of men in tri-corner hats to be an electrifying entry point to history. That's part of the reason McCulla approaches her work with an inclusive, expansive eye. She applies that to written history subjects, oral history subjects, and the objects she obtains for the Brewing History Initiative's collection. "The museum wants to tell national-level stories, but national stories are composed of individual-level stories," McCulla says. "The kinds of artifacts that are collected and are exhibited, always the intention is to make a connection with the person looking at the other side of the glass."

The Smithsonian's collection includes a 1939 record that plays The Andrews Sisters' "Beer Barrel Polka," a tune based on a Czechoslovakian song that became a jukebox hit. It also includes a simple wooden tap handle topped with a bright orange pumpkin, used from 1983 to 1994 at Buffalo Bill's Brewery in Hayward, California, one of the nation's first post-Prohibition brewpubs. It also includes even more recent artifacts, such as an electric tabletop football game that changed American craft beer when, around the year 2000, Dogfish Head Brewery co-founder Sam Calagione rigged the vibrating machine to continuously shake hops into the liquid that would later become the pioneering craft beer 90 Minute IPA.

It's predictable that a polka record or tabletop football game might not command the same hushed respect as, say, George Washington's uniform or the original Star-Spangled Banner that flew over Fort McHenry in 1814 (both of those are also housed in the Smithsonian's collections). But McCulla doesn't see beer artifacts as less deserving of study or appreciation; in fact, their quirky nature is their greatest asset. "Even if people are amused or curious, that's a way to start a conversation," she says. "It's a way to engage."

This humor and approachability belie McCulla's serious professional bona fides: In addition to a bachelor's, master's, and PhD from Harvard, she also has a diploma from the Cambridge School of Culinary Art, and worked for the Central Intelligence Agency as an Italian and French media analyst for three years.

It's one of the strengths other people cite first about her: She's brilliant, but never pretentious. Her confidence in the importance of beer to American life comes from both her academic background and her lived experience. As a child, McCulla recalls her father fermenting batches of home-brewed beer in their kitchen around 1990. "I remember feeling very overwhelmed by the aromas of brewing beer," McCulla says. "I remember dramatically tying a bandana around my nose and going outside to play."

With the benefit of hindsight, McCulla can see that beer has shaped her life before she was aware of it. This is what she wishes for beer history more broadly: for Americans to see how far back the history of brewing here extends, and to recognize that it wasn't white men in the late 20th century who created the beverage so many of us enjoy. "I would love for the public memory and understanding of beer to go back further in time, to be more expansive, to understand that fermented beverages began on this continent before Europeans arrived and colonized the continent," she says. "That can lead to a rich conversation about the structural and historical changes that happened from the 1600s to now."

If that conversation can then happen over a pint, she believes, all the better. ■