

# imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE

## Take it Outside

SUMMER COCKTAILS FOR SIPPING  
IN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

*Plus:*

BLACKBERRY  
COCKTAILS

SPARKLING REDS  
FOR SUMMER

VIETNAMESE COFFEE  
ACROSS AMERICA

THE PIÑA COLADA,  
THREE WAYS

Wheatland Spring  
Farm + Brewery in  
Waterford, Virginia.



Edin Sellers

# Fresh Air

This summer, breweries are bringing beer drinking outside in a big way.

Story by  
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Ohio's Cleveland Vibrator Company didn't create earth-shaking news when it sold its longtime headquarters to a developer in 2019. The equipment manufacturer for mining and other industries needed space, and its Ohio City neighborhood had become a hotbed of bars, restaurants, and breweries, such as Saucy Brew Works. Vibrating equipment no longer jibed.

The land still awaited transformation as the coronavirus proliferated in northern Ohio. Governor Mike DeWine paused indoor dining on March 15, 2020, and "it was 24 hours of shock," says Brent Zimmerman, the CEO and a founder of Saucy, which is typically packed with pizza-eating customers hoisting beer. Afterward, "we just got to work." Saucy soon leased a nearly one-acre chunk of the Vibrator site across the street. The brewery secured permitting and spent nine hectic days and some \$100,000 installing electrical outlets, picnic tables, and a sand volleyball court.

"We transformed barren land into the Vibe Garden," Zimmerman says of the 400-person, socially distant outdoor venue named after its former occupant. It opened last July, the formula of pairing fresh beer with fresh air attracting customers cautiously emerging from the great indoors. "We had early adopters that came and were like, 'This is about the best environment you can get,'" Zimmerman says. The Vibe Garden's initial success laid the groundwork for this year's 2.0 upgrade, featuring three volleyball leagues, live music, yoga, and a weekend makers' market. After all this time indoors, "it's nice being outside, soaking up sunshine, and enjoying company with each other," Zimmerman says.

Sharing close quarters and cold beers has been hard, huh? Emergency decrees shuttered taprooms and brewpubs to curb COVID-19, and indoor service resumed on staccato timelines with reduced capacity and a hastily stitched quilt of safety measures. As the weather warmed, breweries embraced the outdoors everywhere, turning empty lots, parking spots, and excess acres into beer gardens. Outdoor drinking proved outrageously successful. "We take reservations seven days a week, and there's not a day when we don't fill up," says Barry Braden, the owner and a founder of Fieldwork Brewing, which has seven Northern California locations, all with outdoor seating. "People are interested in getting out and getting out safely."

We're navigating an increasingly vaccinated summer, basking in sunshine cutting through months of dark clouds. But our comfort levels are asynchronous, anxiety and fear experienced alongside excitement and elation. The outdoors will be the favored gathering place for the foreseeable future, and breweries are razing the roof on expectations. "It's going to be nuts," Braden says. "We've adjusted production to make sure we're ready for California's reopening."

Breweries are prepping for pent-up customer demand by refining reservation systems, fine-tuning

music schedules, expanding outside seating, and plopping picnic tables and shaded structures on every socially distanced square foot. Welcome to the beer garden's golden summer.



During the pandemic's early months of viral uncertainty, cities emptied as citizens rushed to nature and the countryside—some permanently relocating, others savoring time spent several hours away from too-small apartments. Rural breweries became draws for drinking beer and taking deep, unmasked breaths.

Bonnie and John Branding run Wheatland Spring Farm + Brewery, growing grains and harvesting yeast strains from its 30 acres of farmland in Waterford, Virginia, located around 50 miles northwest of Washington, D.C. The barn brewery steadily welcomes quarantine pods driving in from the nation's capital and surrounding suburbs, unfurling blankets in the grassy meadow or filling well-spaced tables. For much of the past year, customers used phones to scan a QR code and order Wheatland's rustic "land beer," including lagers, IPAs, and farmhouse ales, made with estate grains and the namesake well water. The beers were delivered atop a nearby hay bale—no contact, no contagion. "People have continuously complimented us that this is the only place where they felt safe," Bonnie says. These days, ordering at Wheatland remains contactless via the taproom window.

Wheatland prepped for summer by polishing the property and expanding seating, from firepits to the beer garden and breezy tasting room inside a 200-year-old barn. Customers can match seating to comfort levels, no two levels of anxiety alike. "Everyone is in a different place," John says. Wheatland even cut paths into its crops for secluded seating surrounded by growing barley and wheat. "There's this built-up desire for socialization," John says. "It's even lovelier if you can do it in the middle of a barley field."

Oxbow Brewing owner Tim Adams knows the appeal of drinking beer outdoors. His Maine farmhouse brewery began in 2011 inside a barn in pastoral Newcastle, wooded trails welcoming hikers, bikers, and wildlife watchers alike. Oxbow later expanded to urban Portland and bought a cross-country ski center in rural Oxford. It opened in 2019 as the Oxbow Beer Garden, offering the brewery's lagers and farmhouse ales, wood-fired pizza, and ski rentals from the



Clockwise from top left: John and Bonnie Branding, owners of Wheatland Spring Farm + Brewery; the Vibe Garden at Saucy Brew Works in Cleveland; Oxbow Beer Garden in Maine; Oxbow Brewing owner Tim Adams and Birch Adams, his wife and the brewery's operations and farm manager; Found Artifacts unfiltered pilsner at Wheatland Spring.





Gorges Beer Co. server Sierra Dawson at a seating area on Rainbow Road, a blocked-off section of Southeast Ankeny Street in Portland, Oregon.

Portland Gear Hub. In hindsight, the purchase placed a perfect bet on an imperfect future. “Space has become a precious resource,” Adams says.

Winter brought snowshoers and skiers, and well-bundled customers ringed firepits and filled Oxbow’s custom-built three-sided A-frame structures. “It felt like the place where so many people felt safe enough to dip their toes back into the waters of socializing,” Adams says. To ready the beer garden for this summer’s expected crush, Oxbow upgraded outdoor infrastructure by adding a covered pavilion to protect people from the elements. “The challenge in the summertime is shade,” Adams says.

Devils Backbone’s Basecamp location in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains offers built-in outdoor recreation with more than 70 campsites on the 95-acre expanse. The destination brewery (about 100 miles northwest of Richmond) kept campsites operational throughout the pandemic, and “they’ve booked up fast,” says chief operating officer Hayes Humphreys. Busy weekends spilled into weekdays that welcomed a different beer tourist. “People relocated to our campsites to work remotely,” Humphreys says.

Summer camping is largely reserved, but Devils Backbone welcomes day guests to its property. It features a beer garden carved into individual pods and a ticketed concert series with seating spread across two-plus acres. There’s also horseback riding for ponying up before pints. “We’re finding ways to cater to people across all spectrums of anxiety,” Humphreys says.

Parks are also pressure-release valves, and Northern California’s Anderson Valley Brewing Company rebooted its 30-acre property as a “beer park,” no admission or beer purchase required. Guests can range across brewery grounds, play disc golf on the 18-hole course, walk dogs, or picnic on the freshly sodded lawn with a fruited sour ale grabbed from a mobile beer vendor—new licensing lets the brewery sell beer anywhere on its estate. “We have this resource to make outdoor recreation available to people,” says president and CEO Kevin McGee. “It’d be irresponsible not to invite people to come out.”

McGee’s family purchased Anderson Valley in late 2019, and it spent the pandemic hiatus updating its taproom, amenities, and grounds. “The beer garden is one of the best form factors of casual outdoor socialization,” McGee says. “We took that sentiment and amplified it.” Early returns are as envisioned, and customer patterns are apparent. Couples are picnicking with their dogs, and dads are walking around with young kids playing disc golf, a cold beer in dad’s hand. Squint and it looks like a carefree 2019 afternoon. “We want to provide an opportunity for people to get on with their lives,” McGee says.



Countless breweries open in old industrial factories and warehouses that offer ample expanse for housing brewing equipment and beer-drinking humans. Make your beer and serve it, all beneath one roof. The convenient plus became a negative during the pandemic, leading urban breweries to look outdoors for safer service.

Night Shift runs two breweries around Boston, plus seasonal pop-up beer gardens along the winding Charles River. The 2020 Owl’s Nest outposts were primed to meet the indoor-averse moment, but the regulatory quagmire of reopening postponed beer service until August. Even then, robust sales proved that “outdoor space was such a prize,” says Rob Burns, Night Shift’s president and a founder. “People were very much going out, more so than in a normal year.”

Night Shift’s pop-up beer gardens, including a third street location in a Somerville development, involve more than sticking kegs in grass and filling red Solo cups. “That’s a poor guest experience,” Burns says. The brewery instead bought custom-designed refrigerated draft trailers that are parked on premise, serving lagers and IPAs alongside its own cider, wine, hard seltzer, and coffee—an *everything*-beverage garden for getting reacquainted with friends and nature. The brewery also secured formal approval to license its entire Everett location as a beer garden, more than quadrupling patio size. “Though they’re pretty much just drinking beer in a parking lot between industrial buildings, the demand was exceedingly high,” Burns says. “We’ll have a massive space outside this summer—and forever.”

“The beer garden is one of the best form factors of casual outdoor socialization. We took that sentiment and amplified it.”

—KEVIN MCGEE, ANDERSON VALLEY BREWING

It’s impossible to be picky after spending months stuck inside an apartment. Personally, I regularly spend Saturdays posted up in Brooklyn parking spots converted into taproom extensions, sipping pilsners as trucks honk. In Portland, Oregon, vehicular traffic is banned from one block of Southeast Ankeny Street, a biking thoroughfare home to Travis Preece’s burger-focused Ankeny Tap & Table and Gorges Beer Co., where he’s CEO and a co-founder. The brewery (whose flagship location in nearby Cascade Locks debuted this past June) opened in March 2020 right before Portland shut down, leaving Preece reeling.

He kept the Ankeny staff employed by offering to-go food, feeding frontline workers, and making meals for charities, while the brewery shifted to manually canning beer. Preece heard about the Portland Bureau of Transportation’s Healthy Businesses permit for temporary street closures, giving businesses extra space to safely operate. He applied ASAP, and “it became 100 percent of my time until we figured it out,” Preece says. “It was survival. We had to have the outdoor seating.” The majority of the block’s other businesses supported the closure, and Preece and Co. quickly bought picnic tables and painted a rainbow down the road designated for bicyclists, pedestrians, and emergency vehicles.

Preece went all-in on Rainbow Road, as the experiment was called, spinning a PPP loan into a taco shop (it operated inside his restaurant) and creating a connected nightlife ecosystem. Starting in June of last year, street customers could order burgers, tacos, and Gorges beer on one tab.

“It got more eyes on all three businesses and people to dabble with the beer,” Preece says. Though the taco shop succumbed to fall’s slowdown, Preece is running back an improved Rainbow Road. “Last year was just opportunity,” he says. There are now additional light posts, planters filled with bushes and trees, ropes to cordon seating, and the host stand is painted rainbow colors matching the street, ensuring an orderly experience. Spring sales were strong, and Gorges beers have gained traction. “It was good that we kept our legs moving,” Preece says.

Full Circle Brewing in Fresno, California, prides itself on cold, fresh beer and live entertainment, two things that mix poorly with social distancing. In May 2020, the brewery closed its concert and events venue, Full Circle Olympic, which was perfect except for a particular pandemic problem. “There was no outdoor space,” says Full Circle CEO Arthur Moye. The brewery doubled down on producing canned beer and scanned the state for potential locations with outdoor seating.

“This summer will be a breath of fresh air for folks—pun intended.”

—JOHN BRANDING,  
WHEATLAND SPRING FARM + BREWERY

This February, pandemic-struck Fresno brewery Zack’s Brewing closed, and Full Circle quickly secured the downtown location, featuring a large parking lot ringed with a barbed wire fence. “We saw that and were like, ‘We can make that into an amazing outdoor space,’” Moye says. The team worked to quickly convert the space, installing wooden fences, tables, a stage, and the Grumpy Burger Lady’s food truck. Full Circle officially opened the space in May, and “lines have been out the door,” says Moye, who hopes to create the “backyard hangout” feel with fake grass.

Denver Beer Company made a mighty unexpected pandemic move in buying a football field’s worth of used AstroTurf. The brewery brought the faux grass to its Arvada location just northwest of Denver, where it leased an adjacent vacant lot. “People loved it,” says Patrick Crawford, a founder. “You’re sitting at a beer garden table on AstroTurf in a parking lot, but it’s spaced out and feels safer.” The brewery also laid out AstroTurf and temporary barriers at its main Denver taproom, adding more space to sip Graham Cracker Porter. “We were scraping things together and making do.”

While piecemealing outdoor seating, Denver Beer pushed forward on transforming a former restaurant into a taproom and one-barrel brewery equipped with a counter-service kitchen. The building is small, seating 76, but the patio is a palatial 10,000 square feet outfitted with firepits, *more* artificial grass, and beer tables that could soon again be communal. “By the end of the summer, I hope it’s a place where you can sit and make a new friend,” Crawford says. “That’s something I think everyone in the world misses.”



Creating enough sheltered, distanced outside seating is a logistical and operational challenge. Tougher might be the emotional resources required to serve jittery customers unaccustomed to face-to-face interactions, masked or not. “It’s going to take us all a while to get back up to speed,” says Humphreys of Devils Backbone. “There’s going to be a transitional period where enough of the population feels safe to go have fun.”

Braden of Fieldwork is conscious of the complicated additional role that taproom employees must shoulder. “Therapist is a great word,” Braden says. As Fieldwork staffed up for summer, employees assembled for a refresher on the brewery’s mission, drive, and service expectations, including remaining sensitive to newfound customer needs. “They’re looking for friendly faces and enthusiasm, excitement, and empathy for what we’ve all been through,” Braden says. Regulars getting reservations are hyper-specific about seating requests, making it easier to take care of customers. “We’re a place where people might come for a respite.”

Wheatland Spring will continue to run its reservation system that lets guests book up to four continuous hours on the farm, no payment required. (Wheatland takes walk-ins, turning them away once the farm reaches capacity.) Reservations help the brewery gauge staffing needs and allay stress about seating. “This summer will be a breath of fresh air for folks—pun intended,” John says.

Summer is fleeting, burning hot and bright before falling off. The same might be said for some outdoor brewery options. Appeal isn’t an issue. At Cleveland’s Saucy on a Saturday, “you could have a newborn to a 90-year-old,” Zimmerman says. Drinking isn’t a prerequisite. “Some people just love our pizza and hanging out.” But the lot’s lease is year to year, a question of *when* not *if* construction will begin. Denver Beer rolled up its Arvada patio’s AstroTurf as another business took over to create a restaurant. Night Shift searched for additional Owl’s Nest locations but found landlords hesitant to commit long-term. “We’re not spending \$50,000 to \$100,000 for two months with no chance of coming back in 2022,” Burns says.

For nearly a year and a half, we’ve taken two steps forward only to stumble backward, fumbling toward a normalcy that’ll still feel abnormal. “I remember our brewpub on a Saturday, four or five deep at the bar, with servers fighting through the crowd to get food to tables,” Humphreys says. “It will take time to ensure that this can be done safely.” Beer gardens will play crucial roles as we try to have fun and reconnect beneath the summer sun. Consider it another chapter in beer’s long-running hygienic script. “It’s funny, back in the day beer was the only safe beverage to drink,” says Oxbow’s Adams. Now breweries are among the safe places to drink. “The space component has never been more critical than it is now.” ■





Clockwise from this photo: A tasting flight at Gorges Beer Co.; Fieldwork's beer garden in San Ramon, California; beer drinker Gilbert Carino enjoying a pint on Portland's Rainbow Road; spreading out for a concert at Devils Backbone's Basecamp location in Nelson County, Virginia; Fieldwork's beer garden in San Mateo, California.

