



NEW WEST PROFILE

For River Guide and Go-To Guy for the Great American Beer Fest, It's All About Chemistry

Idaho's Chris Swersey got where he is with the right mixture of good taste, good luck and making sure 3,000 six-packs get to the right people.

By Gina Knudson, 9-03-10

Back home in Salmon, Idaho, I know Chris Swersey's prowess as a rafting and fishing guide. If he told me to run the Main Salmon's Big Mallard to the left, I would paddle to the left. When he tells me to cast into the Geezer hole for a steelhead, I do as I'm told.

So when I traveled to Denver for my first Great American Beer Festival last fall and Swersey said, "Follow me," I tucked in closely behind him. Not only was Swersey creating safe passage through the mobs – the Denver Convention Center is thronged with tens of thousands of festival goers – he also happens to be the GABF's competition manager, meaning he oversees the judging, meaning, "Follow me, I know where the really good beer is."

We were all aware that Swersey had two jobs, but that's not too uncommon for small town folk. For a short while Salmon's junkyard doubled as a travel agency and one of my favorite waitresses is a welder. Chris happened to be the outfitter and guide-slash-beer guy. Certainly, he is a handy friend to have in the same way it's handy to have a Swiss Army knife when you need both a corkscrew and a leather awl.

But we had no idea.

The "Beer Guy" has a very big job. The Great American Beer Festival is the premiere beer judging event in the country. Swersey is responsible for the integrity of the competition, as well as the mind-boggling pairing of hundreds of professional judges with hundreds of styles of beer. And by all accounts, he pulls the task off seamlessly, year after year.

Teri Fahrendorf, a longtime judge at the event, said the world would be a better place if international peace talks were organized as well as the GABF competition.

"The politicians should be watching us for lessons in diplomacy," Fahrendorf

contends. "When a judging table has five beers and no one can agree which is the best, Chris is terrific at breaking the impasse and getting people to talk to one another."

Gregg Smith is a beer writer, a professional in the brewing world and a longtime GABF judge. He says people think being a judge at the event sounds glorious, but it's more grueling than it sounds. "As hard as the judges work, I know that Chris works 10 times as much as we do."

"Think of managing 3,000 6-packs of beer and making sure the right beer goes to the right table. Chris does an amazing job in my opinion," Smith said. "Since he became the competition manager, the GABF has gotten better every year. It's easier to enter beer and it's easier to be a judge."

Fantasy job seekers the world over are currently wondering how one applies to be a whitewater guide-beer god-Swiss Army knife-like person. The road to the top, as it turns out, is littered with empty beer cans (and lots of pint glasses), ballparks, diplomas and inflatable rafts--and it has as many bends as the Salmon River itself.

In the late '80s, Swersey was pursuing a Master's degree in medicinal chemistry at the University of Utah and spending summers as a river guide. After finishing grad school, he realized he might not be ready for life in a lab coat.

He decided to take a year off. Now in Steamboat Springs, Colo., his roommate told him about a new homebrew store down the street. Turns out, the chemist and the adventurer in him had a new outlet.

With a dozen or so batches of homebrews under his belt, he helped open a brewery in Steamboat. Two years later, he was whisked away to start up a brewery in Northern Illinois. Swersey signed on as head brewer at the now legendary Mickey Finns.

"I had a great time – we won all kinds of awards, and it was such a creative place to work," he said.

"We created a beer school for our employees. If you were going to be wait taff, you needed to have the vocabulary to describe our beers to our customers. We wanted our folks to be able to tell people the difference between malt and hops."

The cozy relationship between the pub side of the house and the kitchen also was memorable, both for Swersey and for the customers who drove hundreds of miles to catch the scene at Mickey Finns.

“This was the early ‘90s and we were out there telling people how food and beer go together,” Swersey recalls. I offer him a napkin as he reminisces about Mickey Finns’ French onion soup made with the house porter.



Chris Swersey at the 2009 World Beer Cup in Chicago. Photo courtesy of Brewers Association.

In 1995, the New Jersey native started judging at the GABF. “That was another eye opener for me. Judging forces you to decide what you like about a beer, what makes a certain style of beer great. It’s very intense. It causes you to concentrate and focus. You talk with your fellow judges and collaborate. In the end, you have to agree.”

Then Jake Leinenkugel tapped Swersey to head up the brewing for Leinie’s Ballyard Brewery at the new Arizona Diamondbacks Stadium. A diehard Yankees fan, Swersey still calls the experience “remarkable.”

In fact, he’s certain he would still be happily working at the Ballyard Brewery to this day, if he hadn’t gotten “the call.”

The call came from the river, specifically the Salmon, by way of friends from Idaho who were selling their river outfitting business. Not only did Swersey love the river, but his wife Mary Wright was also an accomplished river guide, and now the couple had two young sons.

“It was a huge gut check, and we decided to change gears,” he said.

In July 2000, the family moved to Central Idaho as the new owners and operators of Silver Cloud Expeditions. But the Salmon River’s gain did not necessarily mean the beer world’s loss.

In 2001, soon after the move to Idaho, the Brewers Association asked him to manage the beer competition at both the Great American Beer Festival and the

World Beer Cup. Except for a few weeks out of the year, he can do the job from Salmon.

And in Salmon (and the Frank Church Wilderness), Swersey and Wright are reliving the creative days of Mickey Finns as they push the envelope of food and beer for their guests on their six-day wilderness trips. I take my napkin back as he reminds me of their incredible Dutch oven pork tenderloin in brown ale-raspberry chipotle cream sauce paired on the river with a smoky porter.

As Swersey sits on my deck, thoughtfully sipping the Bayern Dump Truck summer bock I've somewhat self-consciously slid in front of him, I marvel at the man who can consider grubbing good food, drinking award-winning beer and floating down the river "continuing education." He shrugs and leans back and tries to put it all in perspective for me. "It's still just medicinal chemistry."

Swersey will be at the Great American Beer Festival in Denver from September 16 – 18, rafting in the Grand Canyon with his family most of October and hopefully helping me catch a steelhead on the Salmon River when he returns.

[End of article]

Comment By steven lohman, 9-03-10

Now that my friends.....is a heck of a job. I am in envy!

Comment By Teri Fahrendorf, 9-03-10

Chris is a great guy. He's often found behind the scenes so, it is nice that he gets to be in the spotlight for this article. Thanks for telling people about him. Besides being a very skilled and organized person, he's just an all around nice person.

Comment By Dan Burick, 9-07-10

Fantastic article for a fantastic guy. Cheers to you Chris!

Comment By Tucker, 9-08-10

Well done Chris and Gina. Chris there is a reason you are one of our dearest friends, and its not just the good food and drink. Nice to see you in the lime-light. Gina, you always tell a great story and make us laugh! Keep em coming.

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