Worker Cooperative

INDUSTRY RESEARCH SERIES

by Tim Palmer

CRAFT BEER

Executive Summary

The craft brewing industry presents an interesting possible route to scale for worker cooperative development. The industry, incredibly, is still growing after more than two decades of upward trends. Moreover, the independent and artisan workplace culture fostered by owners and workers alike has made some firms more receptive to employee ownership. The success of Black Star Brewery and Pub Co-Op, as well as the ESOP-owned New Belgium Brewing Company provide models for replication and education. Worker cooperative developer participation in this industry has been minimal to date, though a sustained focus here could make an important impact.

Opportunities:

- High growth industry
- Emerging employee ownership trend could promote conversions
- Coop difference can improve compensation, especially in brewpubs
- Existing model for democratic management being replicated
- Consumer member capital available for start-up costs
- Potential rural development strategy

Challenges:

- High start-up costs and/or longer timeline to profitability
- Larger craft brewery competition
- Low worker cooperative developer experience
- Complexity of tax and regulatory structure

Industry Snapshot

- Industry Size, Market and Future Trends

Beer production and sales in the US is a massive $28 billion/year industry but is dominated by four large manufacturers that account for close to 90% of the national market. However, consumers have been trending toward craft brews. Craft breweries include both stand-alone production facilities, as well as brewpubs with an attached bar/restaurant. Microbreweries (<15,000 barrels/year), brewpubs (25%+ beer sold on site) and regional breweries (<6 million barrels/year) are the dynamic players in this market. In 2014, craft brewers had reached a record high 19.3% of the US beer market by retail value. This was up 22% over the previous year. Craft breweries now employ over 115,000 people in the US, up 5,000 from 2013[1]. This high growth in employment has persisted in the industry for most of the 2000s. Revenue in the brewing industry is expected to grow at a compounded rate of 4% between 2015 and 2019[2]. Moreover, craft breweries will likely drive this growth as their market share is expected to exceed 15% of the industry by 2020[3]. Still, some predict that there will be more brewery closings as too many new start-ups are entering the market. Intra-craft beer competition may become a more important part of the market dynamic than the general split with the four US large breweries, though recent small brewery acquisitions by the big breweries also are having an impact[4].

- Profitability

National estimates of average net profit margins range from 5-6%[5] to more than 12%[6] . However, margins may be somewhat higher for craft breweries as industry giant SABMIller reported a margin of only 3% in 2014[7]. Boston Beer Company (the largest craft brewer) reported a profit margin of 8.76% in the latest quarter[8]. Black Star Pub and Brewery Co-Op's 2013 Annual Report show a margin in line with these figures (6.3%).

- Supply Chains and Distribution

Craft breweries typical are middle links in beer's long supply chain from raw materials to consumption. They rely heavily on the agricultural sector for key ingredients (e.g., barley, hops, yeast) as well as packaging materials and heavy equipment. As such, they are subject to price risks associated with seasonal crops and long-distance transportation costs. They also typical consume very large quantities of water (about 7-12 gallons of water per 1 gallon of beer) and electricity in the brewing process. Except for beer sold onsite at brewpubs, most beer is then sold to distributors who in turn bring the final product to retailers. The heavily regulated and taxed three-tier beer distribution system is a key factor in the growth of craft breweries because distributors function as brand marketers and allow small batch products to reach the same retail shelves as the large beer brands[9]. Nonetheless, some small start-ups begin as self-distributors to save on costs though this option varies widely by state law[10].

- Start-Up and Operational Costs

Brewing is capital-intensive, averaging $900,000/worker in annual revenue[11]. Microbreweries typically achieve less than one-tenth of this ratio, however due to lower economies of scale[12]. Break-even profitability ranges from 3,000 to 15,000 annual barrels. Start-up costs for nanobreweries can be as low as $50,000, while new microbreweries have a minimum of $100,000 - $500,000 in start-up costs based on annual barrel production[13]. Bars and restaurants can cost an additional $250,000 - $2 million based on size and amenities[14]. Yet craft brewing is also a fairly labor-intensive process. In Oregon for example, more than 75% of industry employment is in brewpubs, thus keeping wages generally in line with the low-paying restaurant industry[15]. Nationally the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a weekly average pay of $1,041 in the 3rd quarter of 2014 in all breweries. However this includes all occupations and hides the unequal distribution of pay between lower and higher skilled workers.

- Workforce

Most jobs in brewing are entry-level, requiring only a moderate level of on-the-job training, especially in the larger workforce involved in brewpub operations rather than direct manufacturing. Training for servers, bussers, hosts, dishwashers and cooks typically does not vary much from other food service establishments. On the brewing side of operations, however, occupations range from brewers, assistant brewers and cellar operators to warehousing and logistics. The craft brewing positions often require specialized training over several months prior to employment and some internships and apprenticeships are available[16]. Managerial positions in operations or production (as opposed to restaurant/taproom managers) often require both a bachelor's degree and a moderate level of industry experience.

- Public Policy Factors

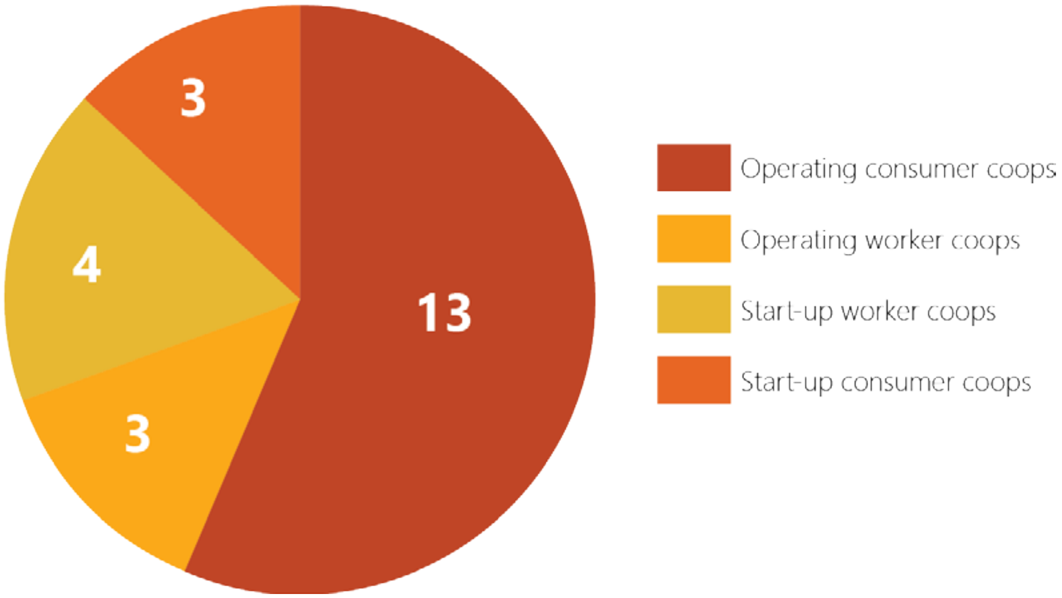
All breweries pay a federal excise tax per barrel of beer produced. The standard rate is $18/barrel, though for small breweries' first 60,000 barrels are taxed at a rate of $7/barrel. States also charge their own excise taxes that vary widely. The US median is $0.20/gallon, but certain states are more favorable[17]. There also is wide variance by state in the degree to which they allow self-distribution. While some allow for unlimited self-distribution, others require licenses and put in place annual volume limits. Lastly, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) oversees both licensing and taxation of breweries according to a complex set of regulations. Knowledge and compliance with these rules is crucial to successful craft brew operations. Changes to brewing law and policies may occur in the near future as the Brewers Association continues to lobby for changes that could reduce administrative and tax burdens (e.g., the Small Brew Act) and/or level the competition with the large breweries..

Cooperative Potential Snapshot

- Existing Cooperatives & Worker Owned Firms

There has been growing interest in both cooperatives and ESOPs in the brewing industry in the past several years. ESOPs in particular have gathered a great deal of attention, as a fair amount of craft brewers have converted to that form of employee ownership beginning in the 1990s but ramping up in the last four years. New Belgium Brewing is the largest (about 500 employees) and most notable ESOP, having completed its transition to 100% employee ownership in 2012. At least 10 other brewery ESOPs exist, employing roughly another 1,000 employees. However, this includes the 70 employees of Full Sail Brewing, which voted in March 2015 to sell out to a private equity firm[18].

On the cooperative side, there are at least 7 operational brewing cooperatives dispersed randomly across the country. Of these, 2 are worker cooperatives, 2 are consumer-worker hybrids (or consumer coops with staff collectives) and the remaining 3 are consumer only cooperatives. However, the success of these cooperatives has inspired a much larger number of planned cooperative brewing start-ups that are at various stages of development. Altogether 16 new brewing cooperatives are planned for opening in 2015. Many of these are consumer only in focus, though at least three plan to build consumer-worker hybrids. Black Star Brewing in Austin, TX, is directly cited by many of these new entrepreneurs as the inspiration for their models and in some cases has directly consulted on their business development.



There is no one area of the country where brewery cooperatives or ESOPs are located, though they have tended to form where craft brewing is already strong, such as Colorado, the Pacific Northwest and the upper Midwest, as can be seen on the table below.

Name	Location	Workforce
San Jose Brewery and Pub*	San Jose	CA
Veneration Brewery Co-op	Denver	CO
Twin Pints Co-op*	East Lansing	MI
High Five Co-op Brewery	Grand Rapids	MI
Fair State Brewing Cooperative	Minneapolis	MN
Burlington Beer Works Co-op	Burlington	NC
Tuckaseegee Brewing Cooperative	Jackson County	NC
Los Alamos Beer Co-op	Los Alamos	NM
Fifth Street Brewpub	Dayton	OH
Miami-Erie Brewing Co-op	Middletown	OH
Philadelphia Cooperative Brewery Inc.	Philadelphia	PA
Blue Tick Brewery	Maryville	TN
Black Star Co-op Pub and Brewery**	Austin	TX
Fourth Tap Brewing Co-op	Austin	TX
Yellow City Co-op Brewpub*	Amarillo	TX
Full Barrel Cooperative Taproom	Burlington	VT
Flying Bike Cooperative Brewery	Seattle	WA
Bellingham Beer League	Bellingham	WA
Riverwest Public House Cooperative**	Milwaukee	WI
Artisan Beverage Cooperative**	Greenfield	MA
Seven Bridges Cooperative**	Santa Cruz	CA
Blue Nose Gopher Brewery Cooperative	Granite Falls	MN
50Brew80	Denver	CO

* startup worker cooperative/democratic workplace

** operational worker cooperative

- **Existing Worker Cooperative Developers**

Cooperation Texas has specific experience assisting brewing cooperatives, having provided some technical assistance and guidance to Black Star Pub and Brewery in Austin in its early years. Building on this work, they are now in the process of helping to develop 4th Tap Brewing Co-op, which is tentatively set to launch as a worker cooperative in 2015. Additionally, some of the brewing cooperatives without a worker focus may be receiving assistance from developers. For example, the Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance (PACA) is promoting the Brewers' Co-op of Philadelphia, a cooperative concept with a consumer-producer ownership structure.

However, it appears that many brewery coops have formed or are forming without significant developer assistance. Part of the reason for low levels of worker cooperative developer involvement may be due to location; some of the proposed start-up cooperatives are located in areas where worker cooperative developers do not have a sizeable presence (e.g., MN, MI). Regardless of the reasons though, this relative lack of developer involvement to date is potentially a mixed signal for future growth. On one hand, it may constrain growth in the industry as developers expend their limited resources elsewhere. On the other hand, if many of the start-up cooperatives in the pipeline now successfully launch in 2015 or 2016 it could indicate that the market for worker ownership in the industry can be robust without clear development-by-design elements.

- Potential Partners

Like cooperatives developers, it does not appear that community non-profits or other partners have taken an interest in this industry. There may some potential for future connections, however, with rural economic developers that view small town breweries as catalysts for jobs and economic activity.

While no current connections exist between cooperatives and unions in brewing, the industry may be an interesting area in which to pursue a union-coop model. Historically a bastion of labor strength, the industry's turn to craft brewing has been a factor in the decline of union density. The four major unions in brewing (UFCW, IAM, IBT and UAW) have made little headway outside the big four US beer manufacturers. Unions' desire to combat their eroding influence in this industry may make them more amenable to alternative strategies, such as partnering with cooperatives. UFCW's experience with employee ownership might make it the most logical choice for such prospects.

- Compensation, Wealth-Building and Industry Standards Impact

The low wages in the brewpub section of the workforce (coupled with healthy industry profit margins and growth potential) create the space for worker cooperatives to raise standards directly for the lowest skilled brewery workers. To some degree, Black Star Brewing offers an example of this already occurring. Black Star instituted a no tipping policy in 2011 and instead offered higher across-the-board wages to reduce the well-known inequities between the front and the back of the house in the restaurant industry. The Austin brewpub's wage and compensation policies earned them High Road Employer status in the Restaurant Opportunities Center's Notional Diner's Guide to Ethical Eating in 2013 and 2014[19]. The coop has set its minimum wage at $12/hour, increasing to $13.50 after three months. Both figures are well above national averages for servers even when tips are included. Employees also have access to health insurance benefits, retirement accounts and 3 ½ weeks paid leave/year, which are all benefits not universally available throughout the restaurant industry[20].

- Workforce Demographics – Current and Potential

The current US brewery workforce is mostly white and male. Women comprise about ¼ of all workers in the industry and people of color are roughly 30%[21]. However, these numbers include both the production and service sides of the industry. If available, employee demographics solely in brewpub operations might likely resemble the restaurant industry more, which has over 50% female employment and close to 45% non-white employment. Worker cooperatives that could bridge the divide between the two general groups of workers in the industry have the potential to both build more wealth for workers over their lifetime and reduce inequality across racial and gender lines. By promoting career ladders and cross training within their organizations, worker cooperative breweries could begin to tackle this issue in deeper ways than the conventional craft brewing industry.

- Workplace Culture & Potential for Democratic Management

Besides the differences between beer production and brewpub operation workers generally, the culture of breweries mirrors restaurants in that kitchen staff and floor staff often work in separate teams which interact sporadically. Administrative, professional and finance staff often form yet another group that can be physically separated from other workers. As such, the potential for demographic management in this industry relies on creating governance forms that both promote regular cooperative decision-making within specified teams and at the same time can bring those teams together to make larger choices together when needed.

As it has with industry standards, the Black Star Co-Op Pub and Brewery again provides a possible model for how worker cooperatives can achieve this aim in brewing. Black Star divides their workforce into four teams (Beer, Kitchen, Pub and Business) for team-specific operations. They also bring all worker owners together for large universal decisions, such as setting compensation rates, through a Workers' Assembly. The Assembly in turn sends an elected liaison to the Board of Directors to intersect it with the cooperative's consumer members and governance.

While still relatively new, the Black Star model appears to have attracted the attention of several new startup brewery cooperatives that may try to duplicate its structure elsewhere.

- Financing

For new breweries, the cooperative form can provide a potentially useful alternative source of start-up capital. 21 of the 23 brewery cooperatives or new cooperative concepts employ consumer membership as a way of raising funds on the front end. By offering membership ahead of launch, these businesses gather needed capital, build reliable customer bases and take advantage of early branding and marketing.

However, consumer membership revenue is probably less useful as a source of ongoing revenue as membership growth plateaus over time in a given location. Renewable membership fees can correct this problem, but may also have impact on governance structure.

- Tools and Technical Assistance Needs

In addition to the common array of technical assistance needs for worker cooperatives (governance formation, business planning, recruiting, etc.), brewery worker cooperatives may also need specific assistance understanding and navigating beer taxes and federal and state regulations. Additionally, for those seeking initial financing through consumer membership or stock sales, having access to a developer with experience helping to build multi-stakeholder cooperatives and/or alternative financing mechanisms could be immensely valuable.

Key Considerations for Worker Cooperative Development

- Startups

As noted above, the startup costs for new microbreweries can be substantial especially as all cooperative (worker or otherwise) brewery projects to date have included brewpubs in their business plans. While smaller facilities are possible and perhaps even somewhat popular, nanobreweries cannot turn a profit or hire any meaningful amount of employees without first expanding production levels. As one New York nanobrewery proprietor noted in an interview, his efforts were "really a non-profit arts projects." Another owner in San Diego put it more soberly (no pun intended), saying, " It's got to be a side job. Producing this low volume of beer wouldn't support many lifestyles or raising a family."[22] What savings can be had from brewing in a garage or similar setting are negated by the miniscule revenue yields. Thus profitable microbreweries must either be launched at a sufficient size initially or built up to that size slowly and patiently over time.

However, worker cooperative breweries that finance their launch wholly or partially through the sale of consumer memberships in a multi-stakeholder ownership model can mitigate some of the risk associated with starting a new business. Below is a sample of the number of consumer members at existing or prospective brewery cooperatives and an estimate of the additional capital they have brought to the table.

Brewery	Current Status	Est. Consumer Membership	Est. Consumer Membership Revenue	Model/Notes
Black Star Pub and Brewery Co-Op	Operational	3,308	$496,200	One-time fee of $150. New memberships brought in roughly $26,000 in 2013.
Riverwest Public House	Operational	800	$32,000 - $160,000	$40 annually/$200 lifetime
Fifth Street Brewpub	Operational	2,700	$337,500	Launched with 850 consumer members
Flying Bike Cooperative Brewery	Pre-launch	1,082	$162,300	Also has sold nearly $300,000 of non-voting preferred stock to the public
Blue Tick Brewery	Operational	291	$25,000 - $50,000	Used higher cost lifetime membership for initial launch
Los Alamos Beer Co-op	Pre-launch	420	$105,000	Also has class B non-voting equity interest members
High Five Co-op Brewery	Pre-launch	100	$15,000	

As the notes indicate above, consumer membership can be sold at different levels and costs and non-voting equity stock also has been used to finance brewery start-up phases. The latter strategy can be a substantial funding source if marketed correctly (see for example, Flying Bike's stock sale). Such sales are often temporary as the cooperative buys back the stock once it is operating stably. Thus they practically have the same effect as traditional loans except that both initial access to funds and repayment or buyback terms are usually much more favorable for the organization.

- Conversions

The potential for finding existing owners that may wish to convert their businesses to a worker cooperative form may be higher in the craft brewing industry than in others. While there have not been any worker cooperative conversions yet, employee ownership generally has become more well known in the craft brewing community. The ESOP conversion of New Belgium Brewing in particular drew the attention of industry experts and the public. The continued success of New Belgium brands post-conversion and its plans to expand to second production facility in Asheville, NC, highlights that stability of shared ownership structures. Consistently ranked in Best Place to Work lists, New Belgium also is one of only 79 companies to make the B Corp Best for the Workers list and 41 companies to make WorldBlu's List of Most Democratic Workplaces. Beyond 100% employee ownership (achieved gradually from 2000 to 2012), New Belgium practices open book accounting and has used a variety of democratic structures in its internal decision-making, from a consensus format (when it was smaller) to elected committees and fully participatory and frequent staff meetings. This workplace culture and economic success has engendered such a high degree of loyalty from New Belgium employees that turnover is down to the 5-7% range per year[23].

In addition to the lauded New Belgium example, numerous other ESOPs exist among craft brewers. There are varying degrees of ownership levels among these firms, but with each conversion, soon-to-be exiting owners in the industry are being exposed to an alternative succession strategy. Many of the first generation of craft brewers that started their businesses in the 1990s built their identities around cultural and brand distinction from large breweries. As such, the idea of selling their businesses to bigger concerns may be less appealing than in other industries. Additionally, some industry insiders believe that the existing workplace culture in craft brewing already encourages employees to think and act like owners, making actual employee ownership a natural evolutionary next step[24]. Regardless of the existing suitability of exiting owners or brewery workers for employee ownership conversion, though, there is little sign that the trend of ESOPs in craft brewing is slowing. In fact, one of the most recent ESOP conversions (of the RAM Family of Restaurants and Breweries in December 2014) is the largest to-date, bringing in 1,100 workers (out of 2,000) into a 30% share of a 40-year old company. COO Dave Iverson noted that the ESOP formed specifically after they had observed the growing popularity of ESOPs in both the brewing and restaurant industries[25].

The key for worker cooperative developers will be to capitalize on the rising popularity of ESOPs in the brewing industry and extend that interest among outgoing owners to worker cooperatives as well. To start, more basic outreach and education on the worker cooperative model is needed. The Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC) has begun this work by appearing on the MicroBrewr podcast in January 2015. There SELC promoted worker cooperatives among its audience of craft brewing enthusiasts and outlined the advantages of worker cooperatives and multi-stakeholder cooperatives among brewpubs[26]. Continued education efforts like these also need to be coupled with one or two successful examples of worker cooperative conversion projects. Given craft brewer's history with ESOPs, such conversions could have an outsized resonance among craft brewers and become part of the general momentum toward employee ownership in the industry.

- Democratic Management Model

In addition to focusing on the funding advantages of consumer membership and the appeal of employee ownership in the industry's culture, developers interested in bringing worker cooperatives to scale in the brewing industry also may need to find an easily replicable governance model. This perhaps becomes more important in craft brewing than other industries because of the appeal of multi-stakeholder funding.

Interestingly enough, the existing governance model at Black Star Brewery already has begun to spread to new coop brewery start up projects without the assistance of any developer. Some of this effect may be due to its status as almost the only notable example of a worker cooperative brewery or simply the degree of networking among craft beer enthusiasts, but it may also indicate that the model itself may suitable for export. Riverwest Public House Cooperative in Milwaukee has used a variation of the Black Star model since it launched in 2011[27]. Primarily a consumer-owned pub (they do not brew beer on site), Riverwest also has a workers' body (in its' case the Workers' Collective not Assembly) that governs the day-to-day business operations of the pub. Their Workers' Collective also includes volunteers in its membership, but remains subordinate to consumer-owner Board of Directors including on issues like wage setting[28]. In addition, two prospective cooperative brewpubs, San Jose Brewery and Pub[29] and Yellow City Co-op Brewpub in Amarillo, TX, plan to use a similar structure. Yellow City already has written and posted its by-laws, which are nearly identical to Black Star's[30].

Lastly, while many of the other cooperative brewery projects that are close to launch around the country do not include explicit forms of democratic staff management in their structures, many of them cite the Black Star example as an inspiration for their work and several have directly consulted with Black Star worker owners, including via site visits to Austin. Such breweries include Flying Bike in Seattle, High Five in Grand Rapids, MI, and Los Alamos Beer Co-op in New Mexico. The degree of informal networking in the craft brewing industry appears to be an asset in the bringing any shared ownership ideas to scale.

- Rural Focus

Worker cooperative developers that already focus on rural areas may see breweries as a valuable part of their larger strategy because of their ability to create and maintain moderate employment levels in a small town setting. Such observations have already drawn the interest of economic developers. For example, the growth of Mother Earth Brewing in eastern North Carolina, has gained attention because of its contribution to revitalizing Kinston's downtown[31]. Similarly, the growth of Michigan's craft brewing industry has attracted the attention of the state's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development which is actively seeking to assist breweries with supply chain connections to agricultural producers[32]. Existing state-level craft brewing associations also often tout the impact breweries have on small town economies[33]. Worker cooperative developers could use USDA Rural Cooperative Development Grant (RCDG) funds to complement the work of economic developers and bring a cooperative dimension to new rural brewery projects.

Additionally, the shorter supply chains that give added viability to craft brewers in rural locations also could be more thoroughly linked to agricultural cooperatives. Cooperative developers helping forge those links could help improve the financial health of more than one sector of the cooperative economy as well as provide the building blocks for cooperative expansion into other industries. Lower crop prices, for example, could encourage worker cooperative buyers to use those products to branch out into cider, mead, spirits and other related production lines. While not a cooperative, Rogue Brewery in Oregon has branched out into distilling and cheese production because of its ability to control raw materials costs through vertical integration (Rogue directly owns the farms that supply it[34]). A strong enough economic bond with agricultural cooperatives could provide the same opportunity for brewery cooperatives.

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Democracy at Work Institute
US FEDERATION OF WORKER COOPERATIVES

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