

Brewing big plans

With a commercial background and a passion for beer, Sabrina Kunz is the new head of the New Zealand Brewers Guild. She talks about issues, opportunities and where to from here for the country's brewing industry.

On her background...

I actually started as a lawyer in Australia and one of my first roles was working on war crimes for the ICTY (International Court Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia) just before I finished university. I was then an associate for the senior judge administrator for the Supreme Court of Queensland and went on to work in commercial litigation and insolvency. After three years in law I moved into corporate governance, then went to Canada and worked in business development around property information. I met a Kiwi and moved to Christchurch where I worked at EQC and then started full-time at the Guild this year. I serve on two rugby league boards, I'm involved with social enterprise and am also on the board of a transport operator in Christchurch.

On what excites her about leading the Brewers Guild...

The brewing industry is a microcosm of any industry in New Zealand in which you have everything from very small to very large, and that's who our members are. There are lots of ideas and lots of passion, and certainly the way we view beer now is as an experience... It really has evolved to be something much more akin to a wine experience, in which people are seeking out specific brands and specific styles. I think there's a lot of opportunity to really leverage what New Zealand has done for its wine industry, for the beer industry.

On the possibilities...

People are incredibly passionate. Not just brewery owners, but right along the supply chain and through to consumers. And people aren't afraid to express their opinions... there is a lot of eagerness to really try and do more. I think there's huge potential in beer tourism and many of our members are starting to talk about that. We have a beautiful country and a lot of our breweries are in some fabulous locations and they're serving local and that represents a huge opportunity.

On the issues...

There's been a boom, particularly in 'craft' or smaller breweries, and we're starting to see challenges with the number of entities in the marketplace, but I don't think those are particularly different to other industries where you have a lot of players. Things like access to capital is always going to be a challenge... and how to find your competitiveness in that environment.

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members would like a stronger voice at the table around dealing with those; a continued vigilance on quality of beer, and that's an area that's a challenge for small to large – it can be a huge learning curve for smaller breweries as they move into the commercial space. There are several ongoing labelling consultations, which is potentially an issue for craft brewers who rely very heavily on their labels as artwork and design as part of their sales strategy and differentiation.

On being a woman in the beer industry...

There is a perception that beer and brewing is a 'boys club' but I worked in commercial and finance and various governments and I would say that this has been one of the most respectful industries that I've been a part of. A week after I was hired, the Independent Brewers

Association of Australia announced their new ED CEO, who is also a woman, and the head of Beervana is a woman. When you look at what that means for the industry, that inclusiveness and diversity, I think that is a real positive. We're going to highlight women in brewing at our Guild Conference in a panel discussion with women from the industry. We're pretty excited to start having those conversations in a more elevated form.



On the upcoming Brewers Guild Awards...

The awards continue to be the largest and most prestigious for our industry in New Zealand. Last year we received just over 950 entries, compared with about 250 eight years ago. That shows the growth in the industry and we routinely get the feedback that because we judge to international style guidelines they are the most meaningful for brewers. This year we've introduced new categories – we have a Champion Exhibitor, Champion NZ Beer, and three Champion Breweries (Small, Medium and Large). The point of expanding those Championship categories was to make sure we were reflecting the high quality of beer produced across our industry – particularly amongst our smaller and medium-sized breweries, and to really celebrate that as well.

