
Postcard from Worcester

DAINA CHEYENNE HARVEY AND ELLIS JONES

Alec Lopez, along with Sherri Sadowski, founded the Armsby Abbey in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 2008. It has built a reputation as a hub for craft beer and slow food lovers alike throughout the region. It was, for many years, one of the only places one could get Hill Farmstead beers on tap outside of exclusive parts of Vermont. (Hill Farmstead has long been considered the brewery that established and perfected the New England IPA style and is regularly rated as the number one brewery in the world.) The Abbey has built a strong following for its selection of local, US, and international craft beers on tap that is unrivaled in New England.

ELLIS JONES: What I want to talk about is just your experience in this area: starting the Abbey and what you think this helps reveal about New England, about Worcester, about this area, about beer and the kind of culture that goes along with it. Like, what's our little part of the world look like in comparison to other places?

ALEC LOPEZ: Think of the early exponential growth of beer. If we look back to 2008, when Armsby opened—let's say there were probably about fourteen hundred breweries in the US at that point. I know I'm close. We're over seven thousand now. That's a big shift. So that's breweries. Now, places that have good beer for sale have grown exponentially as well. When I started selling beer to the Dive Bar, the network was really small. We felt like everyone knew each other. We knew all the brewers. Like, going to the craft brewers' conference, there were only like a few hundred people there. It was a very tiny world. Now you go and it's sixteen thousand people there. And I'm still asked to speak about every year, so I get these weird snapshots . . . like annual growth in the industry. Curating, there's something we really valued, and there were a few of us that would band together to get certain beers together we found that we loved in Spain or Belgium or Germany working with importers, and it was this fun atmosphere.

My point is today, one of the main differences I see is that the artist curating is, like—it's still as small as it was fifteen years ago. I think there's very few people that actually understand beer that are selling beer. And it's still a very tight network of the people that truly have their passions one hundred percent in it. The shift has been in the way distribution works, the way the whole industry works. You know, we're always at the mercy of distribution on our side of the equation. But you'd want to order your beer from a distributor. There weren't many that had good beer. And you would know that they carried this brewery, but you wouldn't know what they specifically had. Right? So you'd place a wishful order and then like nothing, or 1 percent of that, would show up. You'd be mad.

For me, that was a catalyst to do two things: really dig into my relationship building with breweries, with traveling all around Europe and the US. I think ultimately that's one of the reasons we are where we are today . . . accessibility for certain, that's one of the reasons. But another thing was changing the way distribution works here in Massachusetts. It took me a while to get this to happen. But the change I made was I made an actual on-hand keg inventory that I could order from. And they did not want to do that. That was a very hard thing for them to do. They didn't want to show their hands, you know?

So it's funny, in the beginning there was an email to me from the inventory manager from one distributor . . . the whole on-hand inventory. Now for me I couldn't manage week-to-week what they had, what they got in. So I'd manage quality and time that way sometimes, and then all [of] a sudden there would be one more name on the email chain. And then another name. And now it's this dizzying array of every place that sells beer in the state. But I feel kind of happy about being responsible for that, because it made it possible for people to sell beer more easily. You know, before, the system didn't work for people trying to sell beer. Can you imagine ordering twenty things and one shows up? It's really difficult to work that way.

JONES: So that makes me think about this relationship stuff. I mean, one of the things I've noticed right off the bat—the first time I came, in 2009—was it was the only place to get Hill Farmstead. And

I've always heard that's because of the relationship you have with Shaun Hill. So tell me about that . . . those kinds of relationships which are a little off the map, more unique in really building that in this area.

LOPEZ: Just two real angles in this for me. One is, why are certain beers here at the end of the day? Because of how I do what I do, that's really the biggest catalyst. We pay meticulous attention to every detail . . . time, temperature, cleanliness, so I can manipulate every single draft line however it needs to be. I have one singular M.O. and that is to provide people—to give you access to the best beer that I have access to in the exact condition the brewer intended it to be. So that requires manipulating textures sometimes over a time arc of something beyond draft for a few days.

[Two, it] requires knowing not only about beer styles and what they need, but the actual individual beer and what it specifically needs. So I know that you know Edward [by Hill Farmstead Brewery], under perfect conditions, has this window. You know it's like a three-week window where it is what it's supposed to . . . what it can be. Right? It doesn't mean it's terrible after that; it's changing. So with beers that are, right now, I suppose most in vogue, the very aromatic expressions of hops, it's one of the most fragile things in the world of beer. Most people don't even know that. But if you allow the aromatic to fade, you change the perception of the beer so incredibly, because now you're giving the backbone of the beer a bigger stage, so when the aroma fades, now your perception of malt changes and the beer's very different. I do this with my staff quite often just to keep them sharp with their palate, with intentionally having varying vintages of something hoppy, like two weeks, four weeks, six weeks, just so they can get the spread of the sort of diminishment and the evolution.

Edward is an American pale ale produced by Shaun Hill at Hill Farmstead Brewery. Hill Farmstead names their foundational beers after family members, and Edward was Sean's grandfather. As of 2020, Hill Farmstead has been ranked as the best brewery in the world for six years in a row and seven of the last eight years by RateBeer, the world's largest, most popular beer review and rating website. The Hills' presence in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont dates back eight generations, including

the building of the area's first tavern in 1809. On any given summer afternoon, hundreds of cars dot the side of the farm road, as craft beer enthusiasts line up to grab bottles and cans from the barn and perhaps sip a glass of Edward outside on the lawn.

But managing those things—and the glassware and how clean it is—that is why I think we continue to have access to such elegant and wonderful things. If you know the thing with Farmstead, people are quick here to say that it's about the relationship between Shaun and I. But the fact is the relationship came second. The only reason his beer is here is because he feels that I'm the only person that can sell it the way it needs to be—sorry, *present* it the way it needs to be presented. Certainly no better reflection of that than this lager series, Poetica. I have the Czech-made lager faucets. We exhausted ourselves with the learning curve of those faucets. And to be able to pour lagers in this really wonderful way through these faucets, that's amazing. But I think that overall is kind of more the tone.

Poetica is a variant of Mary, which is named after Shaun Hill's great-grandmother. Poetica is a pilsner that is lagered off of Mary in oak puncheons for two months and then slowly conditioned and carbonated for three to four months.

I build relationships in multiple ways. I think one of the big catalysts for this place came in 2012. We already established a name, but working with the Shelton brothers, we did the first iteration of the festival here at Mechanics Hall. And that happened without the city even really knowing that it happened. So here we, we had 110 hotel rooms, many of the world's greatest brewers in one room, my room. We hosted everybody, Sherri, my wife, and I. We made these awesome welcome baskets for every single brewer and put them in their room, like a survival kit. They had a hand-drawn map of Worcester, bottles of water, snacks, et cetera, so we started off with this really nice impression. I had met half of these brewers at least. The other half, I hadn't. We set up a VIP lounge in the building with just brewers; a couple really good beers on all time, just for them. It was a free place to hang out. And then at the Dive Bar, we hosted them every single night privately with food. So for that weekend, I did more for Armsby in terms of

relationship building than I have in the entire span of my career prior. Because I would fly to a festival in Brussels or Madrid, and maybe I'd spend time with two brewers, or three brewers, and start to build a friendship. Here I had a hundred in a room, solidifying the ones [friendships] that I had, and then building new ones. All those brewers in this room watching the attention to detail with our beer service and seeing how educated the staff were, I think really shot us forward in a lot of directions. So all these little moments, all the while maintaining focus on really just the service of beer, and the relationships of the brewers that I love.

The Dive Bar was a Worcester institution for twenty-five years before closing in 2019. It was regularly ranked by popular magazines as one of the best dive bars in the United States. On most nights in the late '90s there were more door guys than bartenders. Alec is credited with transforming it from a college bar to more of a beer garden. It was the first place in central Massachusetts to get craft beer.

JONES: So we're in New England, which at the moment is at the very top in the US in terms of craft beer. How would you describe the kind of evolution of the cultural scene, and the strengths and weaknesses that Worcester and Massachusetts have to offer the craft beer community?

LOPEZ: I exist in an odd microcosm within Central Massachusetts.

Like if you walk into this room on any given day, a really serious percentage of the people have either come from a great distance to be here specifically, or because we're in this kind of Bermuda Triangle—Trillium, Tree House, and Hill Farmstead and everything else that matters to people in between. So anyone making the trek from down south, west—they're in Boston or New York for a business trip and they're a beer fanatic—they come here. So it's not so much—I don't feel like maybe the [People's] Pint or the Boynton would feel in terms of an audience. It's a very different experience for me. So I don't know how to comment on that specifically because I don't really interact with a broader version of the beer scene. I don't go out really hardly at all, so I kind of feel like I'm on an island in a lot of respects. And the island is global. It's so strange that Armsby in the beer community is a global brand. And that to me is forever mind-blowing. Sherri

and I were in Helsinki last year, making our way up [toward the] Arctic Circle. We stopped at a little beer joint in Helsinki. The first interesting thing was an obscure little Swedish brewery [that] had a beer called Vermont IPA, which I thought was really cool. And then four other obscure little breweries from that area all had New England in their name. More interesting to me was the bartender. I was wearing an Armsby shirt, and he said, “Oh my God, how much do you love that place?” And I was like, “A lot.” He said, “Oh man, I’ve only been twice, but if I’m even in the US for anything, I go there.” And I was like, holy shit. He said all the brewers here [Helsinki] talk about [the Armsby]; they are all trying to get their beer there. And he says, “Do you live near there?” And I was like, yeah, I’m like two miles from there. I go there every day. He’s just like oh my God. But then I introduced myself. He was really cool, but it’s just amazing to me, people send me pictures of themselves in Rome, wearing an Armsby shirt. It is an interesting universe for sure.

And I think a lot of it gets lost. What’s important to me sometimes feels like white noise in the context of what beer has become. You can go to Applebee’s and they have their craft lines. And you know, when I started selling good beer, when I stopped selling shitty beer at the Dive long ago, the entire bar scene in Worcester, the bar owners I knew, they said I was an idiot and that I was going to go out of business. In fact, I was pretty alienated. Most of the people stopped talking to me. And people thought I thought I was better than them. It was a really odd time. I actually started second-guessing myself at some point. But I was very committed to my path.

Not that long after, I started getting calls in the other direction. “Hey, I know we haven’t talked in a while, but I was wondering if, like, you had a suggestion for a beer?” At the same time I was doing my thing, as dumb luck would have it, the world of beer was coming up anyway, so everything I did was being pushed by the beer world at large. In this area, there was the thing called “the Dive Bar Effect.” For a long time everything the Dive did was being mimicked. At one point the president from the Craft Brewers Guild said something to me. He said—I can’t quantify it, but the Dive Bar is responsible for an epic proportion of growth in the craft beer world. I thought that was kind of amaz-

ing. And at this point I think it's hard to even think about these things. Then I started thinking about all the beers that are drawn to Mass, and it's just like, fifty, sixty that I went out and found out in the world. And I killed myself to make them available here.

Massachusetts is blessed with beer. Both Tree House and Trillium regularly rank in the top five to seven of the best breweries. The determined craft drinker could visit Hill Farmstead, Tree House, and Trillium in the same day, making what some have called the Trifecta. It's not unusual to pull up a stool at the Abbey and eavesdrop on conversations about the day's releases at Tree House, or have someone ask you how long it takes to get to Trillium, only to have someone else list off what is on tap in Canton or Boston. It's likewise not uncommon to read on Tree House or Trillium Facebook groups about out-of-towners asking if there is a place to drink somewhere in between the two breweries. The reply is always the Abbey.

JONES: Do you find that most of what you do is work with distributors; is that where you get most of your stuff?

LOPEZ: I'm an anomaly in a lot of ways. One way specifically is that I do not work with any sales reps; the only person that I will communicate with in distribution is whoever is solely in charge of management of their inventory. I don't like having people in my way. But because of the way I work, most things land in distribution already tagged for me. So a distributor for me is a necessary evil. But I don't like to work with any distributors. So I try to communicate strictly with the brewery. So kegs show up with a distribution tagged Armsby. All they're doing is delivering for me. It's an incredible amount of work. That's why there are very few people that do what I actually do. I'm a huge fan of German lager, one of the really difficult beers to get here. In fact, the American public has barely a clue as to what the German lager experience actually is. It's growing now, thankfully, but to try to get a keg from Germany to here is really difficult. If it's not refrigerated, sometimes customs reroutes East Coast to West Coast. So I mean they're kicking a boat all the way to LA to a port. Fuck . . . you know? It's not refrigerated. So certain beers I don't order in the summertime. I keep track of the customs pile-ups, so I know when things are shifting around. I work with importers. I work with the brewers in—you know—in this case Europe, so I know

when a keg ships, when it travels. These things to me are everything. Managing those details costs me a lot.

JONES: I know here at the Abbey there's definitely an overlap for beer with food. One of the things we've researched is the crossover between the craft beer movement, the food movement, and the local farmers' movement. All of these things seem to overlap in some small or large ways. What is your sense of how craft beer overlaps with these other significant cultural contributions?

LOPEZ: So, it's the pursuit of the best experience you can get. Right? So local is important I think because if you're talking about local produce, you're more apt to be able to get a better quality product in much better condition. You know in our case, it's things that are harvested the way we want them. A lot of what we use, like green beans that just came in for us that were picked for us this morning—I could order local green beans through a distributor, maybe they were picked last week or a week ago—and it's these little details. I think culturally as a whole we're exhausting ourselves. Everyone's in this pursuit of the best experience. The best community experience. The best beer experience. Instagram's making it so much worse for people. Like, this is visually stunning. Well yeah, I spent hours making that shot for the fuckin' Instagram. Well, we've created this feeding frenzy of food and drink. And it's prurient. I'm pushing back in a lot of ways against that entire thing. I don't know if you follow Armsby's Instagram, I haven't posted anything on food in a while. It's kind of just beer shots. And the point of all of this to me is this is a place where you come in and you know that what you're going to get has been thought about. Like on the plate, in the glass, those are things that matter. I don't want you to be nervous when you're reading the menu and you don't understand these words. I want it to feel comfortable and approachable. And I think the world keeps doing this razzle-dazzle, like really complicated, overly produced thing and they're losing sight of the point of it all. The point of it is just to be able to go out and forget about whatever it is your day was, and, you know, have a beer . . . have some food. I think that part of it's about, what I think brings people a lot of comfort is knowing that you're working within the local economy.

For me, beer, historically it was really difficult to get from New England. There just weren't a lot of good breweries here. Now it's like, shit, most of my board is from the Northeast. I remember trying to do a Massachusetts Tap Out twelve years ago, and I was just like, ugh. But now there's a lot of new things that keep happening. More and more people are farming. More and more people are brewing in little corners, and producing spirits, and thinking about cocktails, and making better soda. I think we've just culturally woke up and realized it doesn't have to be Coca-Cola and Applebee's all the time.

JONES: What are your general worries about craft beer in New England?

LOPEZ: We've . . . we've . . . we've fucked it all up. We spent so much time in the beginning demanding that people take beer seriously, that they put it on the dinner table, that you acknowledge that this complex beverage deserves to be next to your complex meal as much as that glass of wine. In fact, I could argue nine times out of ten that it can get you into far more interesting pairing experiences than wine, because it doesn't have these rules of the wine world. I'm not taking anything away from wine. Just like, imagine throwing lemongrass in wine. It's not going to happen, right? So we fucking screamed from the mountaintops in the '90s, the early 2000s, take beer seriously, take beer seriously. Well, now shit, it's everywhere. Beer dinners have become the meaningless thing that people do that barely understand either thing, beer or food. Fuck, they're everywhere. I stopped doing them a few years ago, because I couldn't even stand the thought of hearing the two words together, or seeing the place down the street do something. And I'm just like, ugh, man, that's an art. It's not a marketing shtick, you know? So that shit is difficult for me. People serving beer that don't understand the importance of the quality of the product or what the product means. People selling beer that are not educated at all about beer. What I put out front of the house through is like miles past what most would even consider for themselves as a proprietor of selling beer, let alone their staff. I'm excited that the whole world is growing around us, but it's also very bittersweet. At the end of the day probably, it's because I've always taken it too seriously; trying to overemphasize, to

legitimize the little world of beer that we wanted more people to be a part of. And now we got what we asked for. And now a lot of us want less people to be involved in it in a way. It's too late. I mean we opened the gates, the industry, the distributors. It's never going to go anywhere now. How can you go back once you have something good? You can never go back. You're never going to drink Harpoon IPA or something like that. You know? Why would you?

While not doing dinners anymore, Alec is good at bringing in brewers and tapping kegs from their respective breweries. It's rare to get, say, Fonta Flora (Morganton, North Carolina) on tap in New England, but even rarer to be able to sit down and talk with the brewer. Ellis Jones and Daina Cheyenne Harvey have both cornered folks from Kent Falls Brewing Company (Kent, Connecticut) at the Abbey while drinking beers with them. In some ways the Abbey is a spiritual home for us. Ellis celebrates most of his birthdays there and Daina celebrated getting tenure with his colleagues there.