

By JOHN HOLL

2010 has been a good year for Jeremy Cowan. The proprietor of Shmaltz Brewing released his first book, a rollicking autobiography chronicling his childhood, foray into the brewing world, near collapse and eventual slingshot-like success. He opened a pico-brewery on Coney Island for the summer months and just in time for Chanukah has released a vertical bottle pack, from the last seven years of Jewbelation, his anniversary ale.

Oh, and he also won a silver medal — his first — at the Great American Beer Festival.

“This is by far the biggest year we’ve had, the most complicated we’ve ever had and the most successful,” said Cowan. “We were very ambitious.”

The best example of that ambition can be seen in the HE'BREW Holiday Gift Pack, which is a collection of Jewbelation years 8-14 and a bottle of the barrel-aged Vertical Jewbelation, a combination of all seven recipes and then barrel-aged in Sazerac 6-year rye whiskey barrels.

Keeping true to the shtick that has made Shmaltz stand out, the holiday pack comes complete with Chanukah candles and instructions on how to build a beer menorah from the empty bottles.

Back in 1996 when Cowan launched Shmaltz from San

Francisco and bottled, labeled and delivered the first cases himself, it could have been easy to mistake the brewery as just another gimmick, a way to make a quick buck and one that would just become another

piece of craft beer history. In fact, as he notes in his new book *Craft Beer Bar Mitzvah: How it took 13 years, Extreme Jewish Brewing, and Circus Sideshow Freaks to make Shmaltz Brewing an International Success*

(craftbeerbarmitzvah.com) Cowan admits that the whole thing started as a joke with friends.

Soon however, Cowan realized that he could have a legitimate business and was not content to be just another fad or a joke label (although the bottle artwork and tongue-in-cheek phrasing helped propel that mantle) and backed up the product with quality made beer.

In a rapidly growing craft beer market with more choices than ever before, people were slow to respond to Cowan's “Chosen Beer” and seven years after that first delivery, the young entrepreneur had lost tens of thousands of family and friends capitol investment funds and despite some beer name recognition was about to find his business become a brewery casualty.

Cowan pressed on, sold his beer in New York by going shop to shop, bar to bar and eventually gained more and more traction and was able to turn the whole thing around.

Shmaltz now has seven full-time employees. The beers are made at the Olde Saratoga Brewing Co. in upstate New York and Cowan said they will likely produce about 7,200 barrels by the end of 2010. His beers are available throughout the country.

“I am proud of what we have accomplished,” he said in a recent telephone call from New Orleans where he was between sales calls and a promotional appearance.

There is no rest for the weary, however. In recent years Cowan has expanded his offerings beyond the torah and yarmulke and into the arena of weird, the circle of strange, the world of carnival sideshows.

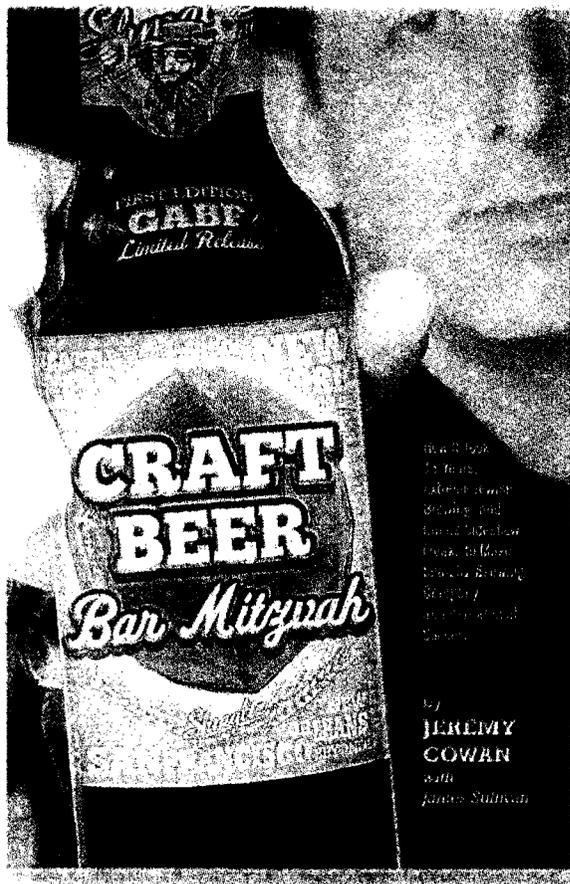
Coney Island Craft Lagers launched a few years ago and now has three regular offerings, including the Sword Swallower Steel Hop Lager, and two seasonal brews. Proceeds from the sales benefit a non-profit corporation looking to rehab the Brooklyn seaside attraction.

Coney Island also became home this past summer to a 1/8 barrel brew house operated by Cowan and designed to be a side show much like its neighbors the Bearded Lady and Human Blockhead.

“It’s really a non-profit arts project,” said Cowan. “The idea is to show people how beer is made and to get creative with what we make.” This included the creation of a funnel cake beer and candy apple ale. The small brewery will return to Coney Island again in the summer of 2011.

Cowan jokes that what he really needs after the last year is a nap. The reality is that the brewery is pressing forward with Cowan revealing that Shmaltz will establish a permanent barrel aging program with three specialty releases planned for 2011.

“We are going to focus on what we do every day and throw in some fun along the way,” he said.



Jeremy Cowan's first book, *Craft Beer Bar Mitzvah*