

## Book Reviews

*Pearl: A History of San Antonio's Iconic Beer.* By Jeremy Banas. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018.  
Pp 178 \$34.00

In this comprehensive food history book, beer writer Jeremy Banas narrates the history of a famous San Antonio brewery, Pearl, from its troubled beginning to its slow death and the legacy it left behind. The Pearl is mentioned in some food history books about San Antonio Beer but there was not a comprehensive story of this company; this is the first book-length study on its history. Banas uses a plethora of primary and secondary sources ranging from local newspapers to governmental documents from the nineteenth century. The work is an exhaustive look at the significance of the Pearl in San Antonio as an allegory for the city's history and the legacy that is still felt today.

Banas approaches this by breaking down the Pearl's history over six crucial periods. The first period discusses the origins of City Brewery (1883-87) and its ever-changing ownership. This time of instability for the Pearl includes accusations of embezzlement against the original owner and another owner, who upon purchasing the company left the state and brewery behind. Otto Koehler ended the tumultuous first period after he took over and stabilized City Brewery in 1887. The second period sees the rise of the second iteration of the Pearl brewery, called the San Antonio Brewing Association (SABA), bolstered by Koehler's decision to acquire the iconic recipe known as XXX Pearl Beer from Germany. While more prosperous, this period was also plagued with controversy, including the scandalous murder of Koehler by one of his mistresses,

as well as the beginning of Anti-Saloon laws in Texas by 1915. In his examination of Otto Koehler's death, Banas relies on court proceedings and newspapers to narrate public perspective on the case.

The third period begins with Prohibition in full swing and Koehler's widow, Emma, taking over the company. Emma revolutionized the company by having SABA take a backseat and converting its resources into its Alamo Industry, later known as Alamo Food Company. Emma turned Prohibition into a profitable period for the company; SABA became the only surviving brewery in San Antonio.

According to Banas, the fourth period was the golden age for the Pearl. After the death of Emma Koehler, Otto A. Koehler, nephew to the original Otto A Koehler, took complete control of SABA and rebranded it to its final iteration, the Pearl. Under Otto A. Koehler's management, the Pearl expanded nationally and internationally, assisted by their feature at the 1966 World's Fair hosted in San Antonio.

The fifth period covers the rapid decline of the brewery. A series of poor leadership decisions and risky business strategies between 1979 and 2001 led to the collapse of the beloved company. One of the major culprits for the collapse was Vice President Frank Spinosa's compromise on the quality of the beer in exchange for marketing and product gimmicks. After merging with a Louisiana company, Southdown Corporation, and later with the General Brewing Company, the current owner of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, the Pearl brewery was forcibly relocated out of San Antonio and the original location was closed in 2001.

In the final sixth period, the original brewery was converted into a mixed-use complex. Between 2002 and 2018, the year this book was published, the brewery became a reclaimed space for businesses, restaurants, and even a new micro-brewery. The Southerleigh, a bar and

restaurant operating within the old complex, has integrated the Pearl's original kettles and machines to brew their own beer. Banas regards this sixth period as a post-brewery revival since freshly brewed beer is still produced onsite.

Despite the crisp narrative, constant shifts in the timeframes sometimes gets it confusing. Banas wants to reach a larger audience and assumes the reader is not well versed in the topic and thus provides an overwhelming amount of information that jumps backwards and forwards in history with little context on the transitions. For instance, the original Otto Koehler hired a nurse to take care of his wife Emma, who was "...virtually an invalid and perpetually bedridden." (pg. 40) This is the same Emma who was able to take over the company, consolidate power, and become heavily involved in the business. (pg. 59) Although it is very possible for someone with disabilities to head a successful business, the only explanation Banas provides is a throwaway comment that Emma was "reinvigorated" after her husband's death. (pg.66) Between these points in history, Banas discusses a wide scope events that impact SABA both before and during Emma's transition to power, but without any real comment on her sudden shift from a person perpetually bedridden to the majority owner and driving force of a large, innovative company.

While examples like this are prevalent, Banas does provide an unbiased narrative throughout the book. This point is crucial, as there are few food histories written on the impact of alcohol in Texas and Banas makes numerous points that allude to a larger food history that are worthy of further study. One such point is the temperance movement that existed and thrived in Texas five years prior to the federal passing of Prohibition in 1920. Another is the impact of German immigrant brewers who upheld the

German Purity Law of 1516 before the passing of the U.S. federal Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, which allowed a seamless transition for Texas brewers to expand across the country, while their competitors adjusted to the new regulations. Overall, this book provides an archetype for historians to further explore the broader food history of Texas and the specific role of alcohol in the formation of the state. Lastly, as this book is written for the uninitiated audience, it provides an accessible understanding of the Pearl brewery and its importance to the identity of San Antonio; one that could even rival the Alamo.

—Zachary Wise, University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley