

The Beer-rillicant Women of Grand Rapids

by Bri Kilroy • photos by Two Eagles Marcus



Angela Steil with a Life Gave Me Lessons at HopCat.

Welcome to Michigan Craft Beer month. Take your senses on a brew tour and taste some of the expansive flavors craft beer has to offer. Three of Grand Rapids' most "beer-rillicant" women share their beer story and the key to enjoying yourself and your drink.

ANGELA STEIL OF STEIL SYMPOSIUM

You'll recognize this redhead from her past work as the House Certified Cicerone and beer director at Gravity Taphouse Grille. She is also a writer for MittenBrew blog and the affiliate consultant for Leaders Beverage Consulting. Steil, 22, recently launched her beverage consulting business called Steil Symposium, LLC.

Steil Symposium, LLC was founded to address several fronts in the beverage industry: staff education, beverage menu collaboration and troubleshooting for bars and restaurants, and presenting at private events by using the world of beer to educate and entertain.

"I'm looking for ways to create a seamless relationship between their beverage menu, their food and the needs of their clientele," said Steil. "It's not just going in to help them revamp the menu. The staff needs to be updated too, so, I offer classes to get their beer knowledge up to speed so they can sell effectively. I think education is key to advancing our beer culture."

Steil fell in love with the creativity and science that goes into beer pairing since the beginning of her beverage journey. Her wish for everybody is to find what she calls the "ah ha" moment for their palate. "It's that moment when you sit back in your chair and think 'I have arrived,'" said Steil.

You don't have to be working on a perfect drink menu or be a prospective cicerone to have a casual, yet entirely intriguing conversation with Steil. Visit www.AngelaSteil.com to get a glimpse of her life, thoughts and ask your own questions.

AMY SHERMAN OF AMY SHERMAN, INC. & HOST OF GREAT AMERICAN BREW TRAIL

With a list of titles including co-host of Behind the Mitten with Amy Sherman and John Gonzalez, owner/founder of Two Chicks and an Oven, Pastry Chef at Osteria Rossa and chef liaison of Michigan Farmlink, you have an idea of the hats Amy Sherman wears.

Sherman, 43, was a chef for 20 years. She began working in the kitchen as a way to earn a living and fell in love with the surrounding creativity and the camaraderie. "When you're in the kitchen, it's like a family," said Sherman. "That's so appealing to me." Sherman began home brewing in college while getting a degree in political science and sociology. She



Amy Sherman enjoying a pint of Rosalynn Bliss at Grand Rapids Brewing Co.

laughed as she recalled brewing so much beer that she and her friends had to store it in their apartment's nook located above the small law offices.

It's hard to imagine a time when Beer City didn't have craft beer available at every corner, but Sherman used to travel to Bell's Brewery in Kalamazoo to experience Michigan's craft beer. "It was the best of the best," said Sherman, listing Bell's drink menu items as Samuel Adams, Anchor Steam and Guinness. "The spectacular thing is it had beers that nobody else had."

Find her latest adventures at AmyOnTheTrail on blogspot, Twitter and Facebook.

LAURA PORTER OF BLACK HERON KITCHEN & BAR AND MICHIGAN BEER BLOG

Raise your glass to Laura Porter, owner of the Black Heron Kitchen & Bar. The restaurant brings a New American menu, including homemade sausages and a variety of poutines, to Grand Rapids.

Porter, 31, fell in love with Michigan craft beer in 2010 when she ordered a blueberry wheat beer at the Vierling Restaurant in Marquette.

"Something just clicked," said Porter. "It was at that moment I had the idea to start the Michigan Beer Blog (www.MichiganBeerBlog.net)."

Porter gained her beer knowledge through experience, traveling to Michigan's famous breweries and visiting some of the lesser-known ones. She tasted everything she could, took brewery tours, sought information from the brewers and experimented with home brewing. "I can't think of a better way to learn about beer than by actually making it yourself," said Porter.

Porter appreciates that competitor brewers collaborate and drive sales for one another because they like to see each other succeed. "Every brewer I know in this city not only cares about the product they're creating, but is also so welcoming to anybody and everybody," said Porter.

The Black Heron Kitchen & Bar, at 428 Bridge Street, is a great place to begin your beer-tasting adventure. Offering 36 taps, six of which are hard ciders, and an impressive Michigan spirits program, you'll have a hard time neglecting this Grand Rapids addition.

Below, the three women you need to know in Grand Rapids' beer scene share their input, tasting tips and favorite trends in an interview conducted over, of course, good brew.

Q & A WITH STEIL, SHERMAN AND PORTER

■ Grand Rapids is getting saturated with breweries. What do you think sets them apart from each other?

Steil: Quality and education. If you aren't creating high-quality product, the customers won't come back and you won't stick around for the long haul. If you aren't educating your staff, your customer base gets confused.

Sherman: The beer has to be good. In Grand Rapids, it's a good thing because they challenge each other to be the best they can be.

Porter: I think that camaraderie and a sense of community really drives brewers to push the envelope and put out the best product possible.

■ What's a brewery worth visiting in Michigan?

Steil: I've recently had my eyes on Pike 51 (Hudsonville) and Cranker's (Mt. Pleasant, Big Rapids and Grand Rapids). They're doing great work that's worth noting.

Sherman: Kuhnenn Brewing Co. in Warren near Detroit. There is this DrIPA (Double Rice IPA), which is no joke. There's sweetness and then it kicks you with these hops. My mouth is watering because I need it right now.

Porter: If I had to choose, I would say Greenbush.

■ What is your personal tasting process/technique?

Steil: Using my laptop or my red notebook to write down absolutely anything that I can assess about the beer: the look, the scent, the mouthfeel, the taste and the aftertaste. I'll dip out of conversation just to take a personal moment to write notes.

Sherman: Look, sniff, taste.

Porter: I start to evaluate my beer before it even comes to my lips. A lot can be told just by looking at it. I like to swirl my beer a little to help pull out some of the aromas and check head retention. Once I finally take a sip, I make sure the beer hits my entire palate and taste buds.

■ How should others go about tasting beer?

Steil: Forget about the label. Simply taste and don't say you like it because your friends do. Be in tune with your palate and remember that everyone is different.

Sherman: Don't chug and keep tasting. People say they haven't found a craft beer they like and I say they haven't found it yet. They just have to keep tasting to find it.

■ What do people need to know when tasting beer?

Steil: A mistake people make is creating an assessment of beer based on something that isn't their own



Laura Porter having a Grand Trunk Bohemian Pilsner at Black Heron Kitchen & Bar

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opinion. Keep in the front of your mind, “Am I enjoying myself?”

Sherman: Have an open mind and be ready to accept whatever might happen next. You could find out you love something.

Porter: Everybody’s tastes are different. I’m a firm believer in just drinking whatever makes you happy.

■ What should people look for in a quality beer?

Steil: Does anything taste, look, or smell off? Is it as advertised? Do the characteristics of the beer create a storyline for your palate that is pleasant?

Porter: Quality of ingredients and consistency. If something tastes off, don’t be afraid to say something and send it back. I’ve made the mistake of not saying anything and ended up getting very ill. I’ll never make that mistake again!

■ What happens to the five senses when drinking beer?

Sherman: Your five senses are super busy when tasting beer. You look at the beer first, smelling it, seeing it. You become interested and can’t wait to get involved.

Porter: Drinking beer should be a full sensory experience; the more senses involved, the more you’ll remember the experience—positive or not.

■ What makes a beer great for you?

Steil: One that is of great quality and fits the mood and moment that I’m in.

Sherman: The flavor of the beer has to be good. At this point in West Michigan, we have to acknowledge that. Brew the best beer you can and we will support you.

Porter: A beer that is well balanced, consistent and served at the proper temperature.

■ Why are glasses important for certain types of beer?

Steil: You need to have glassware that has you enjoying and assessing your beer the best way possible. There are certain glasses for certain styles, but a great go-to is a glass that has an inward taper at the top to hold in the aroma.

Sherman: We want to experience beer the best way we can. Glasses make that happen. Pint for stout or pale ale; snifter for high alcohol, sour or double IPA; Pilsner for lagers.

Porter: Choosing the right glassware can make a huge difference in your drinking experience from getting the hop aroma right into your nose, delivering malt sweetness to the right spot on your tongue, or just showing off the clarity and releasing carbonation.

■ What do you see on the horizon for beer?

Steil: Cigar and beer pairings. At least I’m having a great time with it!

Sherman: More hard ciders, distilleries and sours. Sours are super hot and super awesome. If there’s a sour on the menu with your food, you should try it.

Porter: People want to drink something interesting. I think we’ll continue to see a lot of small batch, experimental stuff—a lot of spices and infusions with new and different flavors.

■ Are there any trends you’re particularly fond of?

Steil: I’ve been waiting for the Gose style to make an appearance in Michigan and here they are! They’ve been popping up around town and I’ve been oh so happy.

Sherman: IPA and pale ale. They’re always available.

Porter: I’m a fan of lower alcohol or session beers so I can taste a few different beers and still drink responsibly.

How about a drink to test your new beer knowledge? Head to a local brewery or pick up that six-pack you’ve been curious about and raise a pint, mug, pilsner or snifter to Michigan Craft Beer Month.

Cheers responsibly, Grand Rapids.



Bri Kilroy is a Grand Valley and AmeriCorps alumni who learned to type through vigorous Mavis Beacon trainings. She also passes as an artist, illustrator and author of this bio.