

# BEER DESTINATION: SAN LEANDRO, CALIF.

By Mike Pitsker

There's a small city in the East Bay known for its sleepy bedroom housing tracts, retiree population and few factories. It has long been the home of Drake's Brewing, and most locals know about The Englander Pub & Restaurant downtown, which serves a huge draft list. But longtime San Leandro residents also know there is an eatery that has served craft beer since 1988: Porky's Pizza Palace. For the occasion of the restaurant's 50th anniversary, owner Gary Valenziano helped brew a beer at the local brewery.

"Porky's Pizza Palace opened in September of 1963," Valenziano said. "The Valenziano family purchased it on June 1, 1983. Mom and Dad retired in October of 2005, and [my brother] Gregg and I purchased the business from them. The original owners started with four employees, and we now employ about 40 people."

"We started carrying Drake's beers the first day they were available [in 1989], and that first beer was an amber ale called Drake's Ale. Porky's first microbrewed beers were installed the year before by Gene Downing from Nevada City Brewing [now out of business], a double handle that poured Nevada City Gold Lager and a dark lager called Nevada City Coal."

"My first encounter with craft beer, as a lot of people in the East Bay will agree, was with a pioneering lady in the beer business back in the late 1980s: Judy Ashworth. I had heard about her Sunol pub and unfortunately was not able to visit Lyons Brewery Depot; we were too busy running day-to-day operations at Porky's. Then I heard it had burned down. My wife and I moved to Pleasanton about the same time Judy resurrected Lyons Brewery of Dublin, and it provided me with a daily conundrum: Do I get off I-580 and turn right to go home or turn left and visit the pub? Judy's and my many years of friendship and my passion for great craft beer show that there were a lot of left turns made in those days."

On the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Porky's offered rollback pricing on its signature cheese pizza. "We showed our appreciation to the community by selling large cheese pizzas for one dollar from 5 p.m. until we sold out, just like Porky's did back in the good old days. We sold 513 cheese pizzas that night and over 650 total for the day, the most in the history of Porky's," Valenziano said.

That day brought another surprise: a special beer co-brewed by Valenziano at Drake's Brewing just for the occasion: Porky's 50th Anniversary Manor Pale Ale. The beer was conceived by Drake's brewmaster John Gillooly, senior brewer Chris Dunstan and Valenziano while sitting in Drake's Barrel House assessing two new varieties of experimental hops. "The brewing was performed by assistant brewer Ian Powell," said Gillooly. "The beer was meant to be a nontraditional pale ale with a balance of malt and a little more color but still possessing the hoppy dry finish we enjoy."

"We would like to thank John Martin and Roy Kirkorian, owners of Drake's, for the opportunity to brew a great beer at our favorite brewery!" said Valenziano.

Here's to 50 more years! Visit [PorkysPizzaPalace.com](http://PorkysPizzaPalace.com).

The central part of San Leandro along E. 14th Street has seen some street improvements, updated buildings and more businesses. One of the favorites for good, old-fashioned Midwestern country comfort food has been Harry's Hofbrau. The chain has made its place on the Peninsula and in San Jose, and it now has an anchor in the East Bay. The family-owned business has its niche, no doubt about that, but for one family member, there was something missing.

"I'd been working on the bosses for a while to get going, because the East Bay is a huge craft beer community," said manager Kevin Olcese. "Harry's started in 1956 in Redwood City. When things started to pick up for Harry — my great-uncle — he decided to buy a bigger spot. Soon after that, we bought the San Jose location, which is where I started the fight for craft beer at Harry's. The San Leandro store was bought in 1989."

"I was going to San Jose State, living in San Jose, and had nowhere to get a good beer on the weekends. I would take the train or a cab up to San Francisco's Toronado, the Monk's Kettle and eventually Rosamunde, but I was dumbfounded as to why there were no places for craft in San Jose! I remember reading a Beer Advocate thread, 'Business trip to San Jose: Where are some places I can go to get a good beer?' to which the only response was, 'San Jose is where beer goes to die.'"

Olcese didn't like the sound of that. "It's one of the largest cities in the U.S. and a very affluent community. After finishing at SJSU, I went back to the family business with a few new ideas. After a lot of begging, I convinced my bosses that the 12 taps in San Jose needed to be updated. I started out with some very approachable styles. Racer 5, Dogfish Punkin, St. Bernardus Abt 12 and Aventinus were some of the first we tried out. We found that people who were coming in with the older customers — their sons and nephews — would cruise by the bar, do a double take and go, 'Wow, I had no idea you guys had that on tap!'"

Olcese continued, "I then added 10 more taps, taking us to 22, and the group of regulars started to grow. I got the idea to do a pint night on Thursdays, where we'd bring in rare beers and some flagships from specific breweries in order to get people to try some of the new beers. It was more based around trying to teach craft rather than make a profit."

"I think our biggest turning point was San Francisco Beer Week. Though my bosses had never heard of it, I had been attending events for a few years. I then reached out to a few breweries directly to do events, and I got quite a few responses like 'Wait, you're not in San Francisco?' or 'Where's San Jose?'"

"I did find some people to play ball, like Ballast Point, Deschutes and a few others. The week set records in sales for Harry's in its 50-some years. After seeing this, the bosses were on board. They promptly bought the draft equipment for the Redwood City location and sent me up there to oversee it. Things went well, and we had another killer Beer Week. In fact, another bar quoted, 'Harry's Hofbrau has set the bar for San Francisco Beer Week events in San Jose.'"

"I saw a lot of potential in the San Leandro store that was not being utilized. The location had a huge patio, a huge bar and a great beer community surrounding the restaurant. We did the install, and it's already being very well received. We are really looking forward to success in the East Bay. We continue to have events every Thursday, Firkin Fridays (with our own firkins) and, during the summertime, music and old movies on the patio."

Sometimes all it takes is some new blood. Visit [HarrysHofbrau.com](http://HarrysHofbrau.com).

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Photo by Mike Condie

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