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## Beer on the house

The quintessential summer drink goes back a long way in Yuengling, the oldest brewery in America

Veena Gomes-Patwardhan



After US President Barack Obama lost a bet to Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper over the fate of the US ice-hockey team in its match against Canada during the Vancouver Winter Olympics, the American ambassador was deputed to deliver two cases of beer to Harper's official residence. One of them, in the spirit of things, was Molson Canadian. The other came from DG Yuengling and Son Inc.

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Tippler trail: (clockwise from above) Visitors at DG Yuengling and Son get a taste of the house brew; the brewery in Pottsville, Pennsylvania; and murals on the brewery's walls tell a success story that has spanned five generations. Veena Gomes-Patwardhan

This is just the kind of anecdote that's likely to become part of the lore at Yuengling, the granddaddy of breweries in America. Right up there with the we-beat-the-prohibition tales. But hold on, that's a bit like looking at the dregs without negotiating the head.

"Hi folks! I'm Gina. Welcome to America's oldest brewery." Our college-age tour guide breezed cheerfully into the wood-panelled bar-cum-considering room, where some 30 of us had assembled. A pretty decent crowd, contemplating all of us had driven down to Pottsville—a remote but accessible former coal-mining pocket of Pennsylvania—on a weekday merely to see how our favourite tippale was brewed.

The Yuengling saga began way back in 1823 when the founder, David Yuengling, arrived in the US, chasing the American dream. He realized it, not by digging for coal like most of his German compatriots, but by opening a brewery in 1829. Young David brewed beer using water from a local spring, selling the finished product off handcarts and delivering it in the surrounding regions by horse-drawn wagons.

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Following Gina up a narrow stairway and into the brewing area, we were greeted by giant stainless steel vats and a smell resembling that of baking bread. Our guide explained how malted barley, corn grits, hops and yeast colluded to produce the sparkly liquid amber as a curious few peeped into the brewing kettles to view the fresh batch bubbling away inside.

History popped up at unexpected places. As a few of us admired the imposing stained glass skylight fitted into the ceiling of the brewing chamber, Gina said: "Pretty, isn't it? It was installed in 1888 to lessen the glare of sunlight reflected off the gleaming copper vats then in use."

The eye-catching murals told their own stories. One portrayed a bunch of frowning female bottle-washers. "Why the grumpy looks?" asked someone. "Imagine slaving away in wet clothes and wet shoes washing loads of bottles daily with hot water. Think that was a fun job?" quipped Gina. At that instant, I remembered the legendary Mother Jones, rooting for better conditions for women bottle-washers and garment workers in the early 20th century. The mural evocatively illustrated why.

Moving on to the adjacent building, the hub for the bottling, canning and packaging, we watched in fascination as hundreds of gleaming glass bottles streamed past us on conveyor belts to be filled with the frothy brew, sealed, labelled and packed into cartons (yes, one case went from here to the prime ministerial residence across the border). Suddenly there was a frenzied thirst for information about the different Yuengling products, which Gina quenched deftly: We learnt that Yuengling's seven craft-brewed products—nicknamed "Vitamin Y" by Pennsylvanians—ranged from the rich, amber-coloured Traditional Lager and the Pilsner-style Premium to a full-bodied, dark-coloured Porter.

Next up—or down, more correctly: the brewery's cold and damp underground caves. Dug by local miners, these served as natural refrigerators for the beer in pre-electricity years. However, during the prohibition era—from 1919 to 1933—the government sealed them to prevent illegal storage. "Many responded to prohibition by mothballing their facilities, but not Yuengling," said Gina. "Yuengling survived by innovatively producing near-beer...and ice cream!" she added, evoking a few incredulous looks. "How many of you noticed Yuengling's defunct dairy across the street?" A number of arms shot up in the air. "See? I wasn't fibbing," she responded.

When prohibition ended with the brewing facilities still intact, switching back to beer was a cinch. Yuengling celebrated the repeal by audaciously shipping a truckload of Winner Beer to the White House. "I'm still not fibbing," said Gina, smiling smugly.

The one-hour tour finally ended back at the watering hole where it had begun, with a complimentary sampling of any two of the Yuengling beers available on tap. I settled for Light Lager, it being low in calories, and then swilled a glass of Black & Tan, an ingeniously refreshing blend of Porter and Premium.

Scores of family-run breweries, mainly across Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, were annihilated when America went dry. Drenched in history, the Yuengling brewery is still flourishing. Dick Yuengling Jr, the fifth-generation owner currently running DG Yuengling and Son Inc., has four daughters, no son. But then, who says women can't run a brewery?

#### A ROUND OF LAGER

Free brewery tours are almost exclusively an American phenomenon, but the small fees others impose are worth it for the first-hand sampling of history and hops

- DG Yuengling and Son Inc., Pottsville, Pennsylvania, US. An American landmark. Great beer too. [www.yuengling.com](http://www.yuengling.com)
- Rogue Ales, Newport, Oregon. Award-winning beer, meal options. [www.rogue.com](http://www.rogue.com)
- Samuel Adams Brewery, Boston, Massachusetts. Lunch bistro. [www.stonebrew.com](http://www.stonebrew.com)
- Mill Street Brewery, Toronto, Canada. Exceptional pub-style food, voted best brewery in Canada for three years. [www.millstreetbrewery.com](http://www.millstreetbrewery.com)
- Brouwerij 't IJ, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Organic beer. [www.brouwerijhetij.nl](http://www.brouwerijhetij.nl)
- Erdinger Weissbier, Erding, Germany. World's largest wheat beer brewery. Charge: €6 (around Rs340). [www.erding.de](http://www.erding.de)
- Fuller's Griffin Brewery, London. Award-winning beers. Charge: £10 (around Rs657). [www.fullers.co.uk](http://www.fullers.co.uk)

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