

UPDATE: 5.14.2009 - This afternoon, the Alabama State Senate passed HB 373 - The Free the Hops bill. [Click here for more info.](#)

The following piece was written and submitted by current [Free the Hops](#) president Stuart Carter. Both bills mentioned in the piece are scheduled to go before the state House tomorrow.

Free the Hops, for those of you who have never heard of us, is a grassroots pressure group trying to reform the beer law in Alabama.

We have two bills in front of the Alabama House and Senate (HB196 and SB116) which will change the definition of "beer" to allow up to 13.9% ABV beers instead of the current maximum of 6% ABV. This will allow a huge number of previously unknown beers into the state, but will not change any of those currently sold here - so don't worry about your favorites! We also have a bill in front of the Senate to reform home brewing (SB355).

"Why does the beer law need to be reformed? Surely there are enough beers already?"

This is a very common question. Let me phrase the question this way: "Why do you want a Toyota? Surely there are enough Fords for sale?"

To add to the absurdity of the position regarding beer sales in Alabama, you can buy a 169 oz. Heineken mini-keg in a grocery store, and you can buy pure grain alcohol at 95% ABV in a store owned and operated by the state of Alabama - but you can't buy any beer made by Trappist monks, nor can you buy Sweetwater IPA.

"Wait a minute!" you cry. "I used to drink Sweetwater IPA! It just hasn't been on the shelves for a while!" That is because the state of Alabama discovered that Sweetwater had changed the recipe so that it now has an ABV of 6.5%, making it illegal to even possess a bottle of this beer in Alabama.

The gourmet beer bills and misinformation

The Gourmet Beer Bills are one of the key steps towards freeing the hops. By allowing higher alcohol levels, these bills open up a world of flavors and business opportunities. The kind of person who is interested in these gourmet beers is the kind of person who would gravitate to the downtown Birmingham business and entertainment district - exactly the kind of person the city wants in to the downtown area! A conservative estimate would put the current losses to the metropolitan Birmingham area at in excess of \$250,000 a year in sales alone.

47 states currently allow these higher alcohol beers to be sold. There is no link between higher alcohol beers and higher rates of either drunk-driving or underage drinking. In fact, according to Mothers Against Drink Driving (MADD), Alabama is in the worst half of the drunk-driving rates, along with Mississippi and West Virginia, who are the other two states with these restrictions!

"Won't underage drinkers get wasted on these higher alcohol beers?"

According to the CDC, the beverage of choice for the underage drinker is hard liquor. Why? They have flavors which you can hide in a cola drink, they are cheap, and you only have 1 or 2 bottles to dispose of. What about beer? It is not unusual to have 12-packs at \$10 or less for American lagers like Miller, Coors, or Bud. A recent offer I saw on Miller Lite worked out at about 63¢ per 12oz. bottle. The flavour of these macro lagers is light and inoffensive, which is why they are preferred by underage drinkers.

The higher alcohol gourmet beers are intensely flavoured, complex, and expensive - it is not unusual

to spend \$7 or more on a single 12 oz. bottle for some of these beers! The complex flavours of a Barleywine, double IPA, or Russian Imperial Stout are more akin to the flavours you would get from a fine wine. To put it another way, Miller, Coors, etc., are like Folgers' breakfast/mild blend. Gourmet beers are like Italian espresso!

What about the home brewing?

Home brewing is what creates the next generation of craft breweries. It really is that simple! Home brewing is a complex, detailed process which rewards a practitioner who will invest the time and the money in learning the craft. The time and money involved tends to attract those with higher disposable incomes - many of whom have been quite shocked to discover that they are breaking the law by brewing their own beer, mead, wine, or cider.

45 other states allow home brewing - now including Utah. Why are Alabamians being denied the opportunity to practice home brewing legally? Why are Alabamians prohibited from entering competitions in their home state, which also bring entrants from all the nearby states - along with their tourist money? All good questions.

How can I help?

HB196 is in front of the House on **Tuesday 4 March 2008**. If you would like to see better beers available for sale in Alabama, please visit <http://www.legislature.state.al.us/> and enter your ZIP+4 in the box in the blue column on the left hand side of the page. This will show you your House Representative and your Senator.

Please call your House Representative on their home or office number and ask them to pass HB196, the Gourmet Beer Bill. You may wish to have a look at the Free the Hops website at www.freethehops.org and read through the Beer Education and Missing Beers sections for more information. Some suggested wording for when you call your Representative is:

"Representative (name), my name is (name) and I live in your district. I wanted to let you know that I am in favour of House Bill 196, the Gourmet Beer Bill, and would like you to vote yes on this bill. Thank you for your time, have a pleasant day."

If you sign up for the Free the Hops newsletter (under "How to Help" on our website) you will get occasional emails from me letting you know the next steps towards Freeing the Hops and you will be added to those who are working to help bring Alabama's drinking culture into the 21st Century!

Free The Hops!

NOTE: If you'd like to submit a piece for posting, send it into andre@bhamterminal.com.