

# GARAGE ROCKS

New Zealanders flip for Garage Project's small-batch releases—and now Americans can get their hands on the goods.

BY KATE BERNOT

► **"IS THAT A BEER?"** A woman in line for a Garage Project brew at this past spring's Firestone Walker Invitational in Paso Robles, Calif., sounds skeptical. Behind the table facing her, a young New Zealander with a black T-shirt and five-o'clock shadow—looking every bit a barista—slowly pours a thick, white liquid from a steel frothing pitcher. The milky substance blooms inside a snifter half full with what looks like dark espresso, creating a swirling, latte-like cloud.

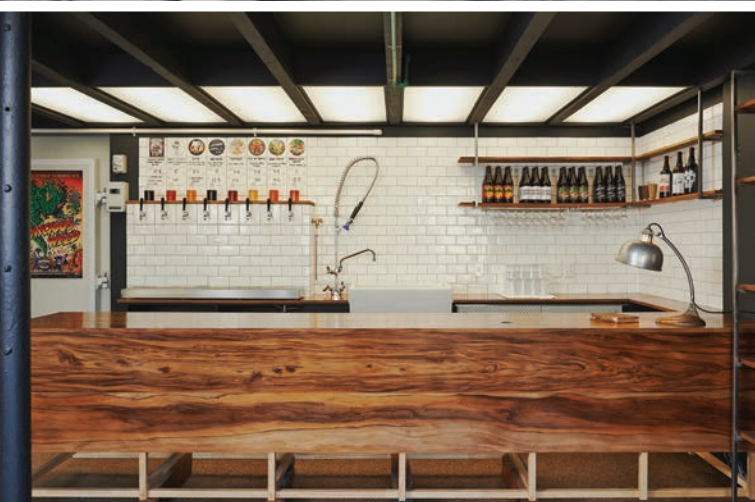
The man smiles. It's not the first time he's been asked this question.

"So it's an imperial coffee stout at the bottom," he explains. "And a nitrogenated lactose cream ale on top." He pauses, then addresses the line. "And it's just run out. I'm sorry, everyone."

Many of Garage Project's public events seem to follow a variation of that script: They explain their beers, then politely apologize because they've run out.

The four-year-old New Zealand brewery, based in a former auto shop in Wellington, was one of the word-of-mouth hits at the past two Firestone fests it attended. It only brews small batches, and rarely the same beers for any length of time. The brewery was founded





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You may only see these three Garage Project bottles sporadically (if they’re ever brewed again), but they’re some of our favorites. When you’re searching shelves this fall, don’t expect to recognize a GP beer right away. “Every beer has a strong personality, so there’s unique artwork to each beer,” says Jos Ruffell. “We want the beers to do the talking.”



**VPA VENUSIAN PALE ALE**  
One of two collaboration beers brewed with New Zealand sculptor and prop designer Greg Broadmore (who’s worked on the Lord of the Rings and District 9 movies), this spiced IPA is an example of Garage Project’s penchant for teaming up with artists, musicians, even a ballet company. Lemongrass and kaffir lime add citrus aromatics as well as a cool herbal note to the strongly bitter sip.



**WABI SABI SOUR**  
This wild ale, brewed with soft honeydew melon and yuzu citrus fruit, is named for the Japanese concept of flawed beauty. There’s not an imperfection to this beer, however; juicy honeydew and a burst of lemon-bar sweetness round out its complex sourness.



**TEXAS TEA**  
Though it’s labeled a spiced brown ale, this beer tastes more like a black IPA thanks to the amplified Warrior, Columbus and Simcoe hop additions. Don’t get too nitpicky or risk missing the vegetal cactus aromatics (that’s real prickly pear juice added to the recipe) and the perfect habanero heat at the swallow. As for the catty hop flavor, everything’s bigger in Texas, right?

◀ Co-founder Jos Ruffell (left) and co-founder/brewer Pete Gillespie (right) at work inside Garage Project.

by Pete Gillespie and childhood friend Jos Ruffell (with help from Pete’s brother, Ian Gillespie) as a vehicle for passion projects. In its home country, and in Australia, Sweden and Norway, Garage Project enjoys a devotion similar to that of Mikkeler or Nøgne-Ø. Aside from the few Americans who have tried the beers abroad or at the Invitationals, drinkers here seem to be among the last to know about this Kiwi darling. That will change when Garage Project begins exporting to the U.S. this fall.

At the heart of its popularity lies the million-dollar question: How do some brewers inspire this level of fanaticism? For Garage Project, at least, the answer appears to lie in the alchemical interplay of location, timing, and a sort of cult of personality that surrounds those who insist on doing something different.

Brewer Pete Gillespie had worked for a decade in English breweries, including Brakespear and Hepworth. He had moved from Australia to Wellington before launching Garage Project with his brother Ian and Ruffell, a former video game designer and regular at well-regarded Wellington beer bar Hashigo Zake. The trio’s ambition convinced Hashigo Zake owner Dominic Kelly to serve Garage Project’s first batches of beer, which they’d produced on a 50-liter kit. They called it the 24/24 series: They’d serve a new beer every week for six months. Before they were even brewed, Kelly agreed to add them to the draft lineup, which at the time was mainly European, American, Japanese and Australian imports. From day one, Kelly was an important champion for the brewery.

“Until the day came that they produced a beer, I guess we were mainly going on the fact that Pete had a fantastic CV as a brewer,” Kelly says. “Their ambition and energy was the only other thing to go by. Looking back now, since it’s been a few years, it feels pretty inevitable. Which is completely wrong, of course, because there were a lot of risks taken.”

Back in 2011, Wellington’s craft beer drinkers were desperate for this sort of innovation. The city’s bohemian-minded population, whose residences are tucked between the town’s damp mountains, consumes most of the country’s beer (and a significant amount of coffee). But there was no brewery operating in Wellington. These days, New Zealand is renowned for its hops and its wine, but Wellington’s beers were mostly from larger breweries or imported from the U.S. So when a top-tier bar like Hashigo Zake began pouring Garage Project’s beers, made in its hometown, fans swarmed.

“Now in Wellington, there’s probably a beer launch of some kind going on several times a week, but back then, the idea that you could taste something different every week was unheard of,” Kelly says. “Someone referred to Garage Project’s new beer releases as Beer Geek Church because at the same time each week, most of Wellington’s dedicated beer geeks were in the same place.”

Word spread. Garage Project grew. They quickly ditched the half-barrel system for something bigger; after another year, they upgraded to the current

20-barrel brewhouse and tasting room.

All the while, they steadfastly eschewed flagships, even when fans pleaded for more of a certain beer. If there is a Garage Project mission statement, it’s constant innovation.

“We were quite inspired by the food world and what chefs were doing, how they can create a lot of new flavors very quickly,” Ruffell says. “Breweries don’t set themselves up well for that, but we wanted to change that. There were no test batches; we just had to keep brewing. That set the tone for the brewery from the start. Every month we’re selling 25-plus different beers. Last year, our third year, we released 26 new packaged beers.”

Those have included mostly hits—Beyond The Pale, a white tea- and jasmine-laced sour wheat ale; and Day of the Dead, a black lager brewed with smoked chipotles, cocoa nibs and agave; or the cream ale and milk stout hybrid, Flat White, which they’ve served twice at the Firestone Walker Invitational—but the very nature of these beers means they’re not universally loved.

“There are some beers that we get excited by, and then the response isn’t what we expected,” Ruffell says. “One person commented: ‘Be a brewer, not a chef.’ But we took that as encouragement.”

Now Garage Project has its eyes on another frontier: beer presentation. Not content to simply fill your pint glass and slide it across the bar, Ruffell and his partners have tried all manner of gimmickry: a custom hot poker that flash-caramelizes beer in the glass, or a mist of orange-and-lemon icing flavor spritzed over the top of a carrot-cake-inspired beer. To bring these flourishes to the masses requires additional locations, another of the brewery’s goals.

“We’d love to have a Garage Project L.A., a Garage Project Chicago,” Ruffell says. “If you look at Mikkeler or even Evil Twin with Tørst, I think you’ll see brewers wanting to have that type of experience of serving their beers.”

This spring Ruffell and Pete embarked on a six-week-long worldwide trip that was part location scouting, part research, and part collaboration brewing, with stops in California, Tokyo, Sweden and Norway. In Tokyo, they joined up with Stone Brewing Co.’s Jeremy Moynier to brew at Coedo. It was ume plum season there, so the three breweries decided to use the native fruit in a saison with red shiso leaves, which then aged in New Zealand white wine barrels.

Which prompts the question: Is Garage Project a specifically New Zealand-bred phenomenon, or is it responding to global interest in beers that throw traditional styles out the window? Or both?

“I use the word ‘glocal,’” Ruffell says. “We spend quite some time getting to know the people that like our beers... We’re so far from the brew scene in America, the things that we’re doing are just so different. We’re just excited to finally get our beers to America.”

The feeling will likely be mutual. ●

MICHAEL VAIL