

OP-ED

# I Have Celiac Disease and I Want to Drink a Beer at a Bar, Dammit!

October 29, 2018

I want to drink a craft beer at a random bar, but I'm not here for the grand gluten-free debate. Millions of people have legit autoimmune illnesses, and 1 percent of the population has celiac disease—a physiological inability to process gluten. Yes, I'm part of that 1 percent. Before that hardcore diagnosis, I'd been off of gluten for decades because of Lyme disease-related issues, too. We long-standing gluten-freers eat and drink! We like to do so with other people! And we're the people on the ticket who need the quinoa and flourless cake others simply enjoy just because gluten-free foods are a thing now.

So, what's the hang-up with gluten-free beer? Why don't bars carry any?

"A lot of gluten-free beers have this 'smacks you right in the face' taste of something that's not beer," Jules Shepard reminds me. Diagnosed with celiac in 1999, Shepard owns an award-winning line of gluten-free baking products and consults with restaurants on gluten-free menus. But when it comes to booze, she notes gluten-free beer's reputation as something that doesn't taste like barley—a taste I admit to only having a vague remembrance of at this point.

That something is sorghum—the most common cereal used in gluten-free brewing. Anheuser-Busch's Redbridge has achieved the most sorghum success. It's marketed as a "rich, full-bodied lager."

Inexpensive and available for more than a decade now, it's still the only nationally distributed option. But I don't like it, and neither does Shepard. Nor does Gluten-Free Philly blogger and attorney Michael Savett, who believes "people drink it more because it exists rather than because it's good."

Until recently, the only counterpoint was Green's Gluten Free, a stellar line of dubbel, amber, and other styles from the U.K. made from millet, buckwheat, and rice. But at \$8 a bottle retail, they were hard to find, expensive, and—beer-distributing friends would tell me—impossible to sell to and move at bars.

But a lot has changed. And bar managers should be taking note.

On the lighter end of the spectrum, Bards' sorghum malt beer, New Grist's sorghum and rice pilsner, and New Planet's pale ales scratch certain itches. Then there are craft breweries that blend a variety of styles like Holidaily, Ground Breaker, Burning Brothers, and Ghostfish, which support a nerdy beer revolution on par with any other community I've come across. They use stellar ingredients, have stunning branding, and have loyal local followings.

**“People like me are often sick and confused and exhausted of all the gluten-free talk. It makes sense that we order something safe like wine or cider and call it a day.”**



Maybe that's part of the problem? "Distribution is fairly geographical," Savett points out. Without the marketing power of established national distribution—like Redbridge's being owned by Anheuser-Busch—getting name recognition beyond a brewery's immediate region is a challenge.

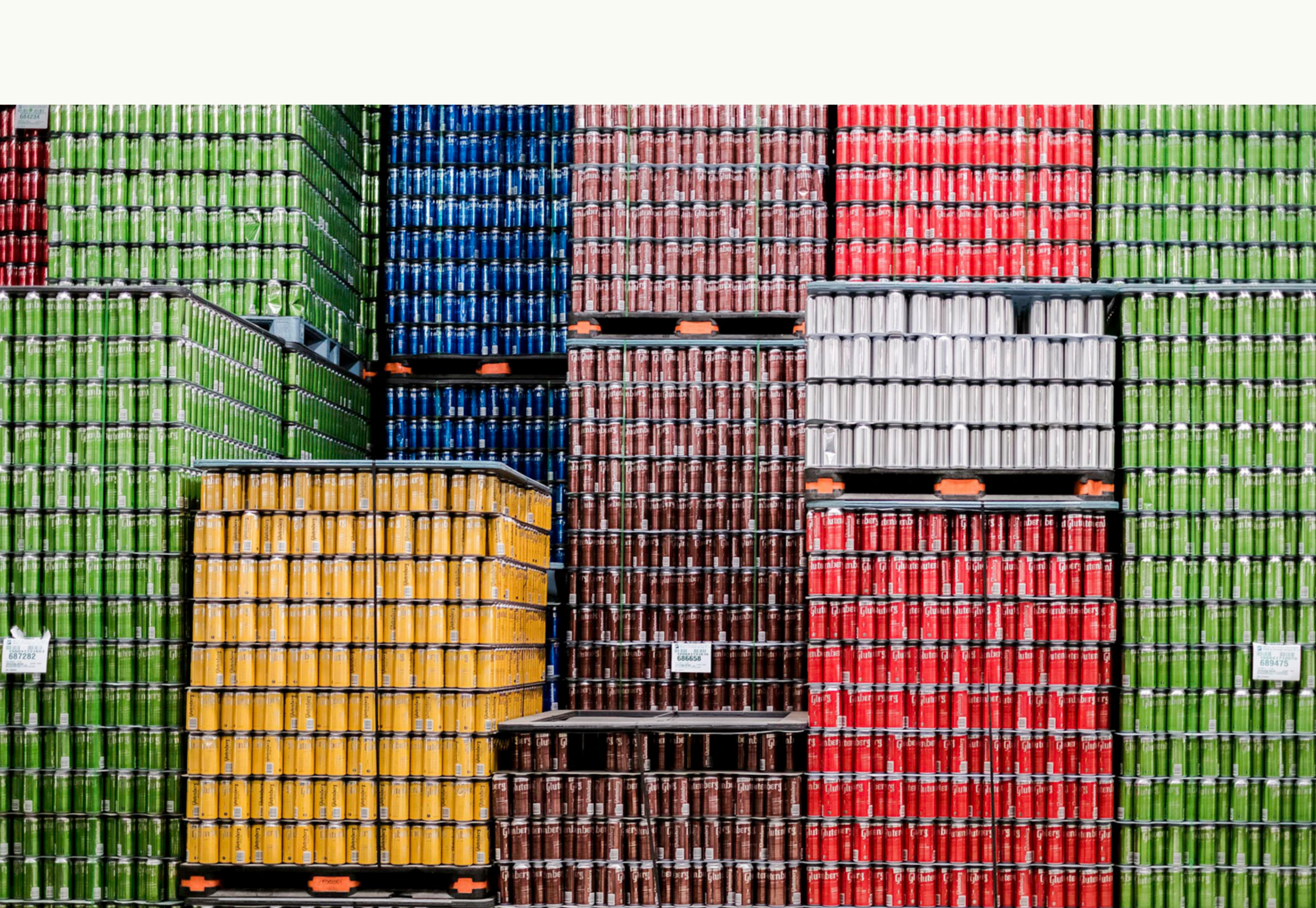
One brand is starting to make a mark. "For us, the challenge is always being innovative," says Frederic Thibault, VP of sales and marketing for **Glutenberg**, out of Montreal. My current favorite, **Glutenberg** blends millet, buckwheat, quinoa, and other high-quality grains into its line that includes an IPA, a witbier, a stout, and an amber ale. I love how four 16-ounce cans are only \$12, so I can regularly indulge. I love how they'll be in 28 states by the end of 2018, and I'm finding them more frequently in large grocers and craft liquor stores.

So, why not in more bars? "We're still competing with over 7,000 craft breweries in the U.S.," Thibault explains.

A manager from a major New York distributor (who asks to remain anonymous) paints a picture: "In one portfolio of 350 suppliers, there are 300 IPAs. There are 95 legit craft pilsners." He's kicking up numbers anecdotally, but I get the point. He describes 15 other salespeople also waiting at a bar, hoping to get their brands some shelf space. For those repping a gluten-free beer? "It's just not front-of-mind."

I ask which if he'd recommend any for his reps to push, and he says **Two Brothers** Prairie Path; they brew "normal, standard" beer and so their gluten-free offering would be an easy "extension line" sell for a beer rep. Plus, he likes how it tastes like "regular beer." I ask if he's sure it's gluten-free. He says it is.

It's not. It's **gluten-reduced**. Made from barley, the beer includes an enzyme added during brewing to reduce the gluten content to below 20 parts per million. I'm glad I looked it up. And I'm glad that **Upstate Craft Beer & Oyster Bar** was out of **Estrella Daura** when the bartender told me it was gluten-free—it's gluten-reduced, too, but I didn't know it at the time. So is **Omission**, one of the most popular bar offerings often touted as gluten-free. So is **Stone Delicious** IPA, listed under "Gluten-free/Cider" at the **Blind Tiger Ale House**. But Green's Endeavor Belgian Dubbel is still gluten-free, though **Cannibal** lists it as "Gluten Reduced" under the legit gluten-reduced **New Belgium's Glutiny Pale Ale**.



Gluten-reduced beers are another area of debate in the celiac/gluten-free world, where people like me are often sick and confused and exhausted of all the talk. It makes sense that we order something safe like wine or cider and call it a day.

But I still want a beer at a bar!

"It's a pendulum shift," the distributor reminds me. He points out that craft beer wasn't everywhere until around a decade ago, when even his diviest accounts started calling him for education. "Once more people do it, then it's like, 'OK, I have to do it because my competitors are doing it.'" Now, good cider is spreading. That could happen with gluten-free beer, too, if more people are vocal about it.

Shepard says we should ask at every single bar. If they have one, we should order it, even if it's something we don't like. I call around. The bartender at Pete's Tavern says, "We have cider on tap. But gluten-free beer? Nope." At Old Town Bar: "I'm not quite sure... but I suspect not." **Rattle N Hum** and **Gingerman** have had Green's on their menus for a long time, but they don't indicate that it's gluten-free. I know **Gramercy Tavern** to be extremely accommodating, and I find out manager Zach Siegel offers a gluten-free **Celia Saison from Ipswich Ale** on the restaurant's 50-plus beer menu, too. "We wanted something good for our beer program and dining experience," he says of rounding out with the particularly savory saison. He notes that most drinkers ask if it's gluten-free or gluten-reduced, and that they usually order seconds.

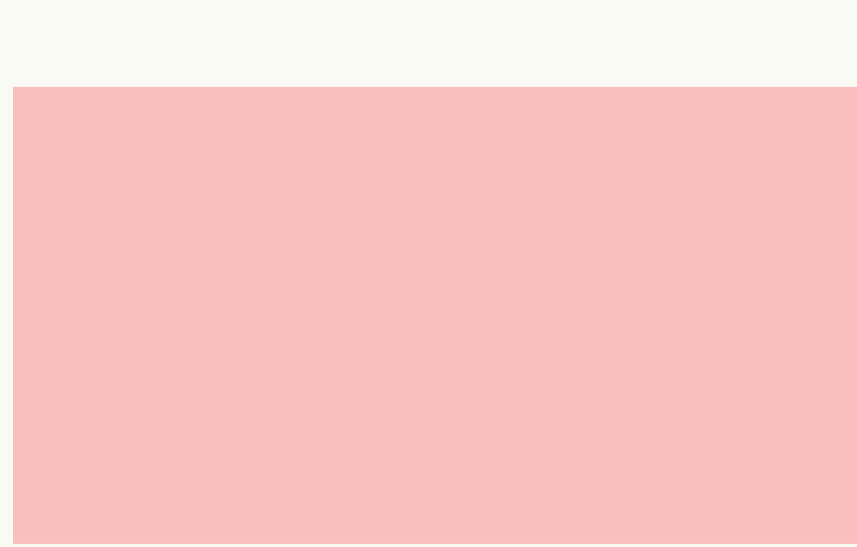
If a place doesn't have an option and allows BYOB, Savett says we should be more discriminating when ordering things online. "Order something you like, like a stout or a porter, and bring them along with you." One seafood shack in Maryland lets me bring in a **Glutenberg**, then asks to keep the can.

Until the pendulum shifts, we need to pull on it.

Or in other words: If the bar won't serve you beer, serve beer to the bar.

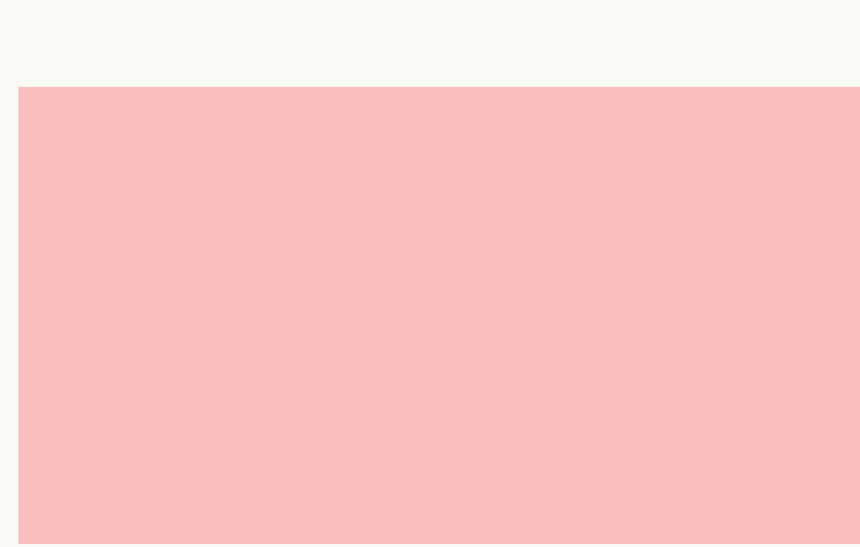
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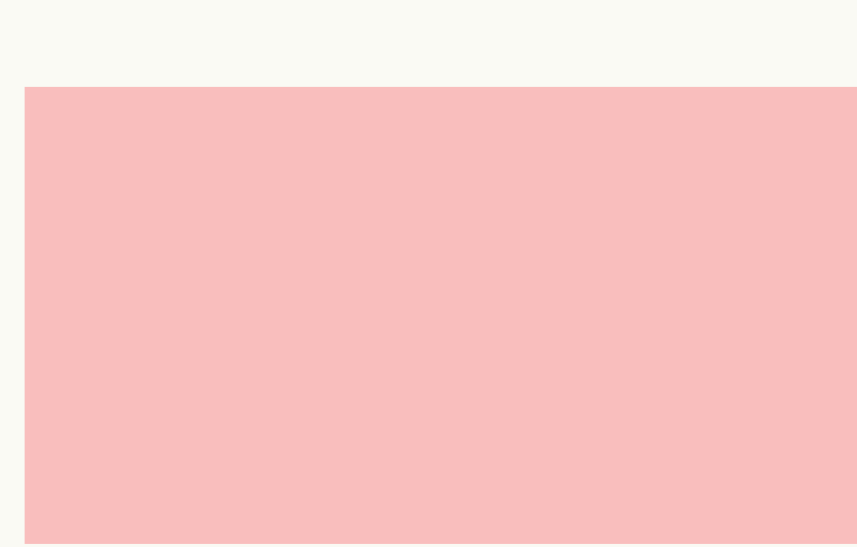
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