

Kentucky Breakfast Stout Blazed a Trail for Founders and Craft



Written by Jason Ley | jasonley.com | [@jasonley](https://twitter.com/jasonley)

*Originally appeared in now-defunct October, a Conde Nast subsidiary, 2.16.17
(<https://oct.co/essays/founders-kentucky-breakfast-stout>)*

I could barely stomach Founders' Kentucky Breakfast Stout the first time I had it. It was August 31, 2013, around 11:00 p.m. After having already consumed countless flimsy cups of \$2 lightstruck Coors Light at a stock car race in Marne, MI, my palate was not prepared to experience its first barrel-aged stout. Embarrassingly, I couldn't even finish 12 oz. of it — a beer with a respected reputation that preceded it, a trophy that craft enthusiasts coveted, and I was done too early.

That beer, the beer that has helped put Grand Rapids, MI on the international beer map as an anchor destination, began as a spontaneous, whimsical idea by Founders Brewing Co. Co-Founder and President, Dave Engbers.

While pouring beer behind the bar at their original location in the Brass Works Building circa 2001, Engbers took a swig of their Porter just before munching on a handful of chocolate-covered espresso beans that a guest shared with him. Although it took nearly two years to take shape, that food and beer pairing moment was the precursor to Kentucky Breakfast Stout.

In 2003, Brewmaster Jeremy Kosmicki revisited Engbers' idea, using their Breakfast Stout instead of their Porter by happenstance. A practice that was relatively still new to craft beer at that time, Kosmicki secured two used barrels from Jack Daniels for the experiment. He liked the idea of "having a little bourbon with your breakfast."

However, after the first batch, Kosmicki discovered that the barrel-aging process thinned out the chocolate and coffee flavor profiles, and knew he needed to "put some ass into it." Today, KBS has evolved into a confident 12.4% imperial stout brewed with stimulating amounts of chocolate and coffee.

He liked the idea of 'having a little bourbon with your breakfast.'"

Part of the mystique surrounding KBS is that it's cave-aged in oak bourbon barrels for a year, which are secured just outside of Grand Rapids via freight elevator 85 feet underground in gypsum mines that date back to the 1890s. Pictures of the caves are scarce. Invites to go down into them: even more rare.

Founders stores close to 14,000 barrels of aging experiments there. With humidity and temperatures tightly controlled, held at about 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the environment is ideal for cellaring. Founders is fortunate to have the opportunity to follow the model of Kentucky bourbon rackhouses, which help protect their products against the seasonal swings of weather. Many of the barrels Founders uses have previously aged Buffalo Trace, Heaven Hill, Jim Beam, or Maker's Mark.

Kosmicki admits that the initial response to KBS in the early days "wasn't anything crazy." "I remember those initial four packs sitting in the cooler at the Taproom for I don't know... weeks, maybe months?" It wasn't until 2005 when KBS caught its first major buzz in the industry when Founders unveiled it nationally at the Extreme Beer Fest in Boston, and its fervor hasn't sobered up since. Enthusiasm may have taken a little while to get going, but the excitement hasn't died down.

Continued...



The demand for KBS finally caught up to Founders. From a decade earlier, when they almost couldn't give it away, they had to transition to an online ticketing system in 2013 to manage the distribution for what became their most highly sought-after bottle release. Then, in 2014, in an effort to get KBS into as many mouths locally as possible, Founders launched their first annual KBS Week in Grand Rapids, which is exactly what it sounds like — an entire week's worth of festivities spread across the city all dedicated to one beer.

Mike Stevens, Founders Co-Founder and CEO, knows the dynamic of their brewery has changed with the rise of KBS, acknowledging that the beer has become "its own animal." According to beer sales volume in 2015, the Brewers Association listed Founders as the 20th-largest brewery overall in the U.S., second only in Michigan to Kalamazoo's Bell's Brewery. KBS has certainly pulled more than its own weight in propelling this growth for Founders.

For the last three years, thousands have made the pilgrimage to Beer City USA for one week in March to drink KBS straight from the source. In 2016, approximately 3,000 pre-sale tickets, each exchanged for a place in line and the right to purchase up to three \$20 four packs of KBS per ticket holder, sold out in less than 90 seconds.

For those who weren't lucky enough to score a ticket, Founders allocated one keg of KBS to fifteen predetermined rotating local beer bars and restaurants, with strategically timed tapings

at three venues per day. It's not uncommon for tourists and locals alike to follow these tapings and attend all fifteen.

KBS Week culminates with the Founders Taproom Release Party on that Saturday, where the line to get inside starts before 6:00 a.m. and wraps around the brewery, which now literally occupies one entire city block.

Don't believe the hype? Watch the pilot episode of *Modern Ahab's* — a non-staged reality show that explores craft beer enthusiasts hunting their bucket list beers.



The KBS doesn't stand alone, and won't often in the future, considering the expansion Founders has planned.

Founders is coming out swinging for their 20th anniversary in 2017. Announced in early 2016 and already in full operation, Founders has added a second brewery — a production-only facility just two miles away — since they've maxed out the real estate in their current location. Its focus is exclusively geared toward expanding their barrel-aged, experimental, high-gravity, and specialty beers they've become known for.

With their expansion, it's estimated that their annual production will increase from approximately 420,000 barrels in 2016 to 1 million barrels by the end of 2017, clearly moving the needle on

their nationwide footprint. They hope to also beef up their international presence, having sold a 30% minority stake in 2014 to Spain's largest brewery, the Mahou San Miguel group, to help them do just that.

Part of the expansion was the introduction of their Barrel-Aged Series in January 2017. This lineup includes four brand new barrel-aged beers, with Frootwood (a cherry ale aged in maple syrup bourbon barrels) being the only new one announced at the time of publication.

In addition to the four new releases, Founders is also upping the ante by packaging Backwoods Bastard (the barrel-aged version of their year-round Dirty Bastard) and KBS in 750 ml. bottles for the first time ever. If thirsty consumers across Founders' distribution footprint of more than 40 states are still nervous about whether they'll be able to get their hands on KBS, then plan a trip now to Grand Rapids for KBS Week 2017.

Achieving perfect 100-point ratings on BeerAdvocate and RateBeer, KBS has undoubtedly been influential in the craft beer scene, leading the way for other iconic barrel-aged stouts to shine: 3 Floyds' Marshmallow Handjee (Munster, IN), Bottle Logic's Fundamental Observation (Anaheim, CA) Cigar City's Double Barrel Hunahpu's (Tampa, FL), Toppling Goliath's Kentucky Brunch Brand Stout (Decorah, IA), and Perennial Artisan Ales' Barrel-Aged Abraxas (St. Louis, MO) are all monsters in today's subgenre that KBS forged.

If they're not already, these craft masterpieces are probably already on any well-respected enthusiast's short list. Drinking a Founders' Kentucky Breakfast Stout easily qualifies as a beer aficionado's right of passage — as long as it's not tainted beforehand by a night filled with Coors Light.