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## A CAPITAL IDEA

With a less-is-more methodology, Lowercase Brewing makes simple, direct beers with a point of view.



STORY BY KELLY KNICKERBOCKER  
PHOTOS BY AMBER FOOTS



**Bounded to the south by Boeing Field** and to the west by the Duwamish River, Seattle's Georgetown neighborhood is an industrial bastion — one of few areas in Seattle not evolving at a breakneck pace. A former machine shop sits at the end of the neighborhood's main drag, across Airport Way from the railroad tracks and a stone's throw from the runway. A slice of that little building is Lowercase Brewing, and scrawled across its façade is a straightforward call to action: "beer."

Inside, Seattleites knock back flavorful, mostly low-alcohol brews. Staff pour pints behind a long, wood-topped bar — everything from their Extra Special Bitter Ale to collaborations made with brewery partners.

Lowercase's founder and co-owner Chris Smith moved to Seattle from Arizona in 2008. The brewery's existence reflects his search for community in a new town. To find his footing in the Emerald City, Smith wanted to embrace the region's culture — its weather, landscapes, and pastimes.

"I asked myself, what do Northwest dudes do?" he said. "They sail and brew beer."

Inside his 525-square-foot Pioneer Square apartment, the former chef and fledgling homebrewer began concocting ales in a seven-gallon pot. For several years, Smith schlepped materials to and from his home through the building's parking structure on one cart, navigating textured pavement and sharp turns with glassware and brews in tow.

By 2012, Smith and his partners — a small group who co-own Lowercase with him now — were conceptualizing a brewery. They celebrated the opening of Lowercase's first taproom and production facility in South Park, in 2014. Despite its small production capacity, Smith was eager to carve out space for Lowercase in the nation's most brewery-dense city.

"In such a competitive market, making a good beer is table stakes," he says. "You've got to make good beer to compete, and even then, you might not be around tomorrow. You have to do something different and better."

In his culinary days, Smith honed a less-is-more approach to recipe development. Using fewer ingredients in the kitchen, he found, often yielded a tastier dish. Lowercase's beers, overseen by Smith and brought to life by brewer John Marti, are crafted using the same methodology.

"We want individual ingredients to shine," Smith says. "An IPA with seven hops doesn't taste like one hop or another. It just tastes like hops."

The same is true with malted barley or malt — the preferred grain for beer-making. Blended malt is a brewing standard, especially for the big guys. The bulk commodity combines multiple varieties harvested across the U.S. for a standardized flavor that can be replicated at scale all year. Smith says that malt blends may be reliable, but their sudsy end-result lacks distinction.

Lowercase makes about 95 percent of its beers using locally grown, single-species grains from Skagit Valley Malting in Burlington, Washington. Choosing specific malts for their distinctiveness gives Lowercase's brews more dimension; variation in flavor is elevated, not suppressed.

"It's not common for breweries to use Skagit Valley malt exclusively. It's a



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Skagit Valley malt exclusively. It's a premium product that carries a price tag to match," says Eric Bulst, who works in sales at Skagit Valley Malting. "Lowercase was an early adopter, and they're at the forefront of using local malt as a differentiator for their beers."

Brewers in the Northwest produce a plethora of hop-forward ales. Rightfully so, since 77 percent of all hops produced in the U.S. — 65.5 million pounds — are harvested in Washington's Yakima Valley. But Smith thinks the industry has over-indexed on hops. Instead of stop-you-in-your-tracks intensity, Lowercase specializes in clean, balanced beers suitable for every parched patron.



"I like beers that I can sit down and enjoy," Smith says. "So we make simple, direct beers with a point of view."

But simple, drinkable beers like Lowercase's perfect-for-summer Mexican Lager aren't less complicated to make.

"There's less to lagers. If you don't make them well, you know immediately, and there's nothing to cover it up with," Smith says. "IPAs are easier to make because you can hop the shit out of it. If there's a problem, you cover it up."

When Lowercase opened its doors in 2014, it had recently become legal for Washington breweries to dispense samples at farmers markets. Smith seized the opportunity to connect with communities in an environment with less competition. Out of almost 180 breweries in Seattle in 2017, still fewer than 10 had farmers market endorsements on their liquor licenses.

"Farmers markets are an extension of our taproom," Smith says. "It's another chance for our people to tell our story while serving our product."

Their farmers market strategy became the company's lifeblood during a difficult time for the business. As production increased — from three barrels to seven and eventually to 15 — their South Park space had less and less room to accommodate retail. In 2016, they had to close the Lowercase taproom altogether.

Smith's team used farmers markets as a stopgap — something that could only work in a region like Puget Sound, where about 40 farmers markets operate in King County alone. Between May 2016 and when the Georgetown taproom opened that November, eight Lowercase employees tag-teamed to staff 300 individual farmers markets.

"It was nearly 100 percent of our revenue then," Smith says. "It saved us."

Farmers markets are still a priority for Lowercase, more so than distribution, even. The brewery has a presence at one market a day, and farmers market sales represent about 30 percent of the company's revenue.

"It's not easy, but it's effective," says Smith. "We get our beer into people's hands and drive them back to the taproom — sometimes in the same day."

The brewery's initial foray into farmers markets was complicated by the beer-delivery mechanism. Taps are a no-go at public markets, legally and logistically, and transporting pre-filled growlers is dangerous, heavy, and wasteful if they don't all sell.

Lowercase was the first brewery in Washington to offer *crowlers* (short for "can-growlers"), 32-ounce aluminum cans filled and sealed with a modified #10 can-sealing machine typically used at restaurants. The crowler machine was originally developed in 2002 for Colorado's Oskar Blues Brewery, and Lowercase acquired its own machine in 2014. Roughly 20 Seattle-based breweries have one now.

Crowlers paved the way for Lowercase's participation in farmers markets, because the containers can be pre-filled, sealed, labeled, and transported with ease. The crowler-sealing machine, which sits behind Lowercase's bar and looks like something out of the Industrial Age, does important work inside the taproom, too.

"Sometimes people want to take beer home, but they already have a cabinet full of glass growlers and not enough space to add another," Smith says. "With the crowler, we remove that barrier."

Simple, it turns out. Isn't easy. When things got tough, Lowercase got tougher — bringing its drinkable, limited-ingredient beers out from behind the bar and into neighborhoods. Beyond local malts and crowlers, Smith is always looking for untapped spaces that Lowercase can fill. While no singular piece of Lowercase's approach is wholly new, Smith has built it all into the DNA of his brewery and its beers.

He's playing for more than table stakes.

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**Kelly Knickerbocker** is a Seattle-based writer with Texas roots. She enjoys exploring the city on two wheels, listening to NPR podcasts, and making travel plans (*almost* as much as actually traveling).

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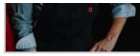


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