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Women of Beer

# Meet the Women Who Are Leading Berlin's Craft Beer Scene

January 20, 2020

Craft beer is a male-dominated industry the world over, but in the German capital Berlin, there's a strong current of women in charge of tastemaking and the taps.

**Berlin's fledgling scene** counts about a dozen or so craft breweries, with men outnumbering women in participation, just like everywhere else. But the difference is that here women are some of the scene's most prominent leaders, in jobs ranging from head brewer to manager, and respected beer sommeliers.

Berlin is known as highly multicultural and liberal, attracting creative talent from far and wide to work at startups like microbreweries. "It's not just in our industry, but in many different branches where you find Berlin more progressive than other cities with women in higher positions," says Michele Hengst, managing director of Berliner Berg. "To start something progressive or different is just easier in Berlin."

Looking a bit further back in history, Berlin has a track record for female leadership. There were the "rubble women" who helped clear and reconstruct bombed areas after World War II and the women of East Germany who were highly active in the DDR's labor market and continue to hold **prime positions** today. Plus, who can forget the most important of all: Angela Merkel, the German chancellor and the EU's longest-serving leader with a 13-year reign?

Meet some of the women on the vanguard of Berlin's craft beer scene.



By Barbara Woolsey





Photo courtesy of Berlin Beer Academy.

### Sylvia Kopp, Beer sommelier

Sylvia Kopp is one of the world's top beer sommeliers. In 2013, she co-founded the Berlin Beer Academy, which introduced some of Berlin's first craft beer classes and tastings for pros and newbies alike.

Sylvia's made it her personal mission to turn Germans onto craft beer and all its diversity. According to the German Brewers' Association, over 50 percent of Germany's beer market accounts for just one beer style, pilsner.

While Germans love beer (around 102 liters per person in 2018) in boot glasses and Oktoberfest tents, craft beer has been met with much resistance because of the Reinheitsgebot (a.k.a. the "beer purity law"). According to the custom, practiced throughout Germany but primarily in Bavaria where it was born, beer can only be made from hops, malt, water, and yeast—making craft beer and its vibrant variations a faux pas at best, and sacrilege at worst.

Sylvia's set on changing these mindsets through her writing (she published *Barley & Hops: The Craft Beer Book* in 2014), classes, and formerly, her work as the American craft beer ambassador to Europe.

The Reinheitsgebot represents an old way of doing things, she says, and perhaps it takes a woman to speak up as men have been more inclined to stick to that tradition.

"I don't think women care as much [about the Reinheitsgebot]. I have not seen a woman fighting for Reinheitsgebot, not at all," she says. "Beer advertisements were targeted at men, not women, so they don't care what beer was and is and if there's something to defend or not."





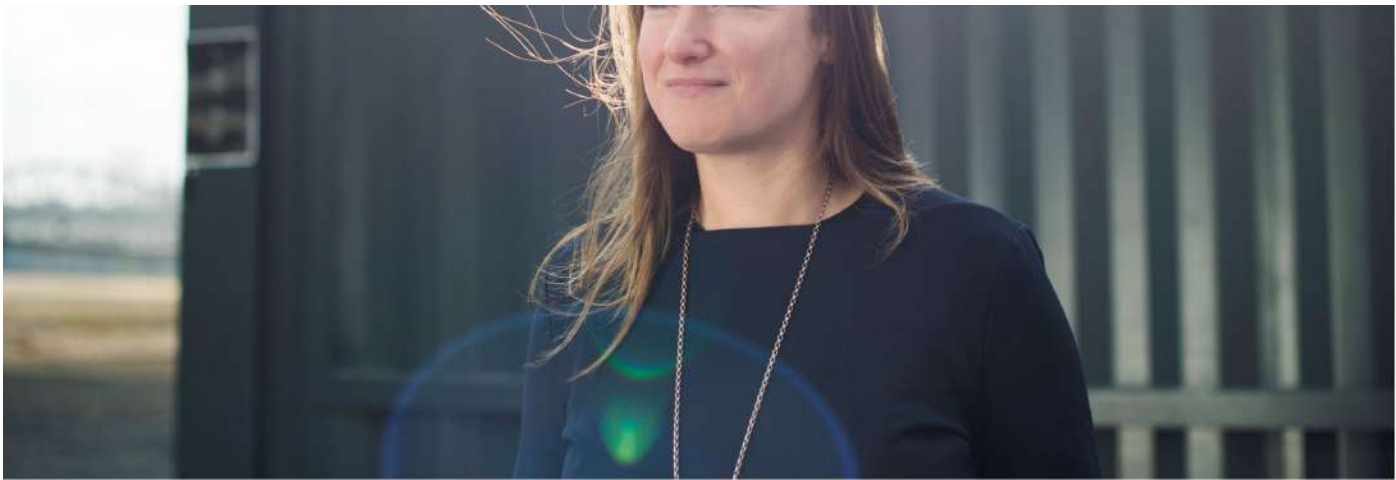


Photo by Maria Schiffer.

### **Katharina Kurz, Co-founder & marketing director of BRLO**

Katharina Kurz is the woman behind the capital's best-selling craft beer brand BRLO (pronounced "Beer-low," a nod to the old Slavic name for Berlin).

Launched in mid-2014, BRLO's claim to fame is a solid range of styles served at hip locations: a taproom and brewery made from shipping containers, and a spot in the gourmet food hall of luxury shopping mall KaDeWe. The brand's success, including shelf space in supermarkets and convenience stores across Berlin, is a testament to Katharina's marketing prowess.

"I'm always talking about being accessible with BRLO, bringing new people to craft beer," says the co-founder and marketing director. "That's what we still need in Germany. We live in a little bubble here in Berlin. Because it's so international, there are so many craft beer aficionados here compared to the rest of Germany, but the geek scene is still small."

Born and raised in Franconia in southern Germany, Katharina happened into Berlin's craft beer scene after working in media and completing a Ph.D. in the art market. She saw the serious challenge of selling craft beer to Germans who didn't want anything but their pilsner and hefeweizen.

"In the beginning, I could feel a lot of skepticism. If I had been a dude with a beer and tattoos, it'd be, 'Of course she does craft beer no matter the background,'" says Katharina. "That has definitely changed, though."







Photo courtesy of Nina Anika Klotz.

### Nina Anika Klotz, Beer sommelier & publisher of *Hopfenhelden* magazine

Nina Anika Klotz is the woman behind Germany's first craft beer publication. The website *Hopfenhelden* (in English, "Hops Heroes") began in 2013 as a passion project "to introduce the people behind good craft beer who are really thinking about their recipes and selling it with love," says the author and journalist. *Hopfenhelden* now has a small team of writers led by Nina. A new article is released every week.

With the online magazine, Nina aims to speak not just to German craft beer believers, but also women who "thought they didn't like beer but it was just pilsner they didn't like."

"I've talked to many craft brewers who have said women are more pleased with [experimental beers]," she says. "It's tougher when you're at a stand or with a specialty beer pack to move men to try a coffee stout or a cucumber gose. That's why [women are] an important target group and there's a lot of untapped potential."

In her newly published German book—the title of which translates to *Because it's light and easy to drink: The ultimate beer book only for women*—Nina explores the role of women in the history of beer and provides tips and tricks for women keen on getting into craft beer.

"You look back a few centuries [in Germany] and see that beer brewing was a woman's job, a household task like baking bread and cooking soup," she says. "In the middle ages, women brewed beer once a week. It wasn't until the 15th or 16th century that the brewing became a professional occupation, and that's where men came in."







Photo courtesy of Schneeeule.

### **Ulrike Genz, Head brewer & co-founder of Schneeeule**

Ulrike Genz's life passion is Berliner Weisse. She's the head brewer and co-founder of the brewery Schneeeule (in English, "Snowy Owl"), the only Berlin brewery focused purely on making Berliner Weisse.

Ulrike is at the forefront of spearheading a comeback for the sour, cloudy style. Weisse was Berlin's most popular alcoholic drink during the 19th century but disappeared during the rise of industrial lagers. Since then, Germans have come to identify the beer with sweet syrups masking its tart taste—but Schneeeule's brewmaster is determined to prove how perfect the beer is au naturel.

"[Selling Berliner Weisse] is still a challenge, particularly in Germany, because the people have relatively good beer here but they don't know sour beers anymore," she says. "But in Berlin, it's much easier to get people from other nationalities into it who don't have these set ideas about Berliner Weisse with syrup."

Schneeeule uses old yeast strains from old bottles to bring to life the beer that Napoleon once called the "Champagne of the North." Most of its variations, including those fermented with ingredients like fresh elderflower, are bestowed with traditionally feminine names like Marlene, Rosa, and Yasmin.

Ulrike left her profession as a civil engineer (it was "boring," she says) to study the engineering behind brewing instead. Schneeeule's creations are a big success in the gastronomy scene; served at fine-dining and Michelin starred restaurants like Nobelhart & Schmutzig, Coda, and The No Name.



Photo courtesy of Michele Hengst.

## Michele Hengst, Managing director of Berliner Berg

Before Michele Hengst joined Berliner Berg, she worked as the COO of a local vegan wholesaler. She had been promoted from press spokesperson.

"I've often found myself in a room full of men aged 50-plus," says the 35-year-old.

Michele joined Berliner Berg, one of Berlin's fastest growing microbreweries, three years ago and found that heading up a craft beer company wasn't much different. "If you look at the bigger corporations, old-school breweries, or even old-school wholesalers, it's almost always men," she explains. "It's alright—I can handle that and it's a challenge I enjoy."

As managing director, Michele pushes for gender equality from the inside. Four of the brewery's 15 employees are women, including staff members in charge of gastronomy and events and customer support. For several years, the head brewer was also female.

Under Michele's watch, the Berliner Berg team has grown and revenues have tripled. "My job is to find the right tone in leadership and lead a wild bunch of colleagues with respect," she says.

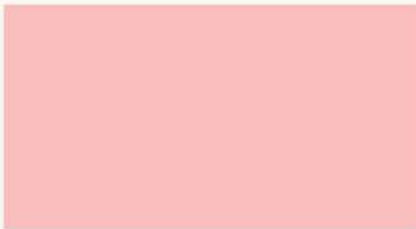
"Everybody has their own ideas, everybody is creative and it's about navigating the team and the direction that I and my managing partners believe to be the right strategy."

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*Top photo courtesy of Nina Anika Klotz.*

ZX Ventures, a division within AB InBev, is an investor in October

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