

JESTER KING TAMES NATIVE  
YEASTS FOR ITS FARMHOUSE-  
STYLE TEXAS BEERS

# Where the Wild Ales Are

by Anthony Head / photo by Kirk Weddle



**Using wild yeast, Jester King's Provenance has twangy-citrus flavors to soothe the wild (summer) beast.**

In Central Texas, we tell tales of wild boars roaming our ranges, gutting the landscape and generally wreaking havoc. We also talk of the elusive, terrifying and probably non-existent chupacabra, a feral beast whose name translates from Spanish to “goat-sucker,” which is also—apparently—its *raison d'être*. Such tales add character to the Texas Hill Country, but it's the wild yeasts (rather than the wild beasts) that add the true flavor. Why? Because wild yeasts make Jester King wild ales.

Jester King Brewery sits at the unincorporated Austin city limits, where the southeast edge of the Texas outback begins. Despite the expansiveness of its compound, Jester King is a small operation, selling about 1,200 barrels a year. Compared to the big beer boys, that's barely above hobby level output, and every drop is farmhouse-style, made with native yeasts.

Farmhouse ales are not like your standard farm-raised beers. Using local wild yeasts and bacteria in place of domesticated varieties affects fermentation in myriad ways and imparts a distinct sourness to the finished beers. In a word, they're divine.

Head brewer Garrett Crowell recently told me that Jester King's cultivated proprietary yeast, which he called the “mixed culture,” originated by blending cultivated yeasts like *Saccharomyces* with some native yeasts and bacteria collected from fruit and flowers at the brewery's Hill Country location. “But that was almost two years ago and they've mutated into their own thing,” he said. “We have a great success rate. We've released almost every single batch we've brewed since starting this culture. But still, with every batch, it's a learning experience.”

It's also a bold risk to concentrate on a beer style that few have heard of, fewer have ever tried and only a few of those enjoy. Despite its small output, Jester King has a rabid following around the world. When a new release is announced, crowds swarm the brewery (which is also packed most weekends as a Hill Country beer garden).

I'm partial to Nocturn Chrysalis, a blackberry, oak-matured sour ale, which is refreshing, nuanced and deeply-flavored. During the oppressive Texas summers, though, I love Provenance: Crowell added lemon and lime zest to the kettle for delicate citrus flavors; it's like a shandy in a bottle. Both beers display that lovely tanginess that makes them such a rewarding drinking experience.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that something so delicious comes from something so wild. But in Texas, beer remains mostly a craft business, with business models designed to produce a limited supply of exceptional beers for smaller numbers of devotees. And if Texans like me want to continue to enjoy such singular beers, we'll need to protect the wilderness and save the wild yeasts. ■■■