



## Asheville's success with 'Beer City USA' title bodes well for Grand Rapids craft brew community

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI — Although the honor is largely symbolic, the new crown bestowed on Grand Rapids by the power of the Internet may have some very real economic benefit.

Just ask Asheville, N.C., a multiple-year winner of the “Beer City USA,” title, which they are sharing with Grand Rapids this year after voting closed Sunday in a **dead heat tie**.

“Being known as “Beer City” has helped our restaurants, our hotels and our tax collections,” said Mike Rangel, president of **Asheville Brewing Co.** and secretary for the Asheville Brewers Alliance.

“Hopefully, the same thing will happen in Grand Rapids.”

Voting closed Sunday at 11:59 p.m. for the annual poll, started in 2009 by home-brewing legend Charlie Papazian, who **officially called it a tie** on Monday afternoon.

Nearly 56,000 votes for 31 cities around the country were cast in the 13-day non-scientific poll, which ended up being a neck-and-neck horse race to the malty end between Grand Rapids, **a first-time challenger**, and craft brew behemoth Asheville.

The final tally: Grand Rapids and Asheville each with 17,849 votes. Next in line was St. Louis, Mo., with 3,451 votes and Bend, Ore., with 2,270 votes. Papazian built a 3 percent margin of error into the results, thus resulting in a first place tie.



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Hopcat bartender Shelby Williams pours a beer for a customer Monday, May 14, 2012. Social media promotion by Hopcat, a bar with 48 beer taps, helped Grand Rapids gain the title of Beer City USA, a shared title with Asheville, NC. (Chris Clark | Mlive.com)

**Hopcat helps Grand Rapids in Beer City voting** gallery (6 photos)

"It was genuinely that close," he said. "Statistically, there's a good reason to do that."

Papazian, who penned the "Complete Joy Of Homebrewing" in 1984 — basically, the home brewer's Bible — said West Michigan popped onto his radar when the American Homebrewers Association chose to book their 2013 national conference in Grand Rapids.

"I have begun to hear good things" about Grand Rapids, said Papazian, who started the poll to highlight the community support that craft brewers tap into.

That support is becoming increasingly evident in Grand Rapids. The city is experiencing a renaissance in craft beer brewing. The city hosted its first **Beer Week** in January as a lead up to the growing annual **Winter Beer Festival at Fifth Third Ballpark**.

"I think it's kind of fun," said Dave Engbers, vice president and co-founder of Founders Brewing Co. "It's very representative of our industry right now."



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Daniel Vanbeek drinks out of an ice mug as beer festival goers enjoy 450 different kinds of beer Saturday, Feb. 25, at the Michigan Brewers Guild Winter Beer Festival at Fifth Third Ball Park in Comstock Park.

Founders, once teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, has **grown in less than a decade into the state's second-largest brewer** and has earned such accolades for its beer's uniqueness and quality that craft brew enthusiasts regularly travel from far-flung states just to visit the company's destination brewery.

Founders' beer is sold in more than 20 states and much of the credit for the title of "Beer City" can be laid at the doorstep of the company's Grandville Ave. taproom.

But it was HopCat that **really trumpeted** the Beer City contest.

"We really took a proactive stance on trying to win this vote," said HopCat owner Mark Sellers, who is celebrating the honor by selling pints of all Michigan beers on tap next Monday for just \$1.50 — a carrot he dangled in front of the bar's substantial social media following.

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Founders, HopCat and the new Brewery Vivant were oft-cited reasons among poll commenters as to why Grand Rapids ought to win the title, but they are not the only elements to the craft brew culture in Grand Rapids that helped the city eek out a win.

The strength of the homebrewing community is reflected in the success of specialty beer shops like Siciliano's Market and O'Connor's Home Brew Supply in Grand Rapids, and the Copper Vine in Grandville, which provide outlets for the hop-heads.

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A group of home brewers is even starting the High Five Co-Op brewery this year.

"We've been talking it up," said Stephen Siciliano, owner of the West Side market that **recently expanded** into adjacent space in order to stock more home-brew supplies. The market hosts a well-attended home brewing competition each year and maintains a popular blog.



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Stephen Siciliano, the owner of Siciliano's Market in Grand Rapids, which is a destination for home brewers and craft beer lovers.

"I think it's wonderful that we're being talked about like this on a national scale," he said. The market has kept a sign with the poll web address on the counter for customers.

His son, Chris, maintains the **market's blog** and **Facebook page** and said the two cities share some similarities despite Asheville having less than half the population of Grand Rapids.

Siciliano's would compare to Bruisin' Ales in Asheville, Siciliano said. HopCat, with 48 craft brew taps, would compare to Asheville's Thirsty Monk, which has 30 taps.

"Everything that makes Grand Rapids exciting right now is present in Asheville," said Chris Siciliano, who has visited the city nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the confluence of the Swannanoa and the French Broad rivers.

"Because it's in the mountains, it feels hemmed in a little," he said. "It's almost like a big Saugatuck."

Papazian, Engbers, Rangel and Siciliano each separately said the size of Grand Rapids and Asheville have likely helped establish both a vibrant craft beer culture and a strong base of enthusiasts necessary to garner enough votes. This could explain why heavyweight beer cities like Portland, Ore., or San Diego did not dominate the vote.

"I wouldn't even pretend we're more of a beer city than Portland," said Rangel. "Grand Rapids and Asheville are sort of like the teenagers in this whole beer thing — kind of young and exuberant."

Rangel said the craft beer culture in Asheville has surged since about 2004. The area is currently home to 10 breweries with several more in various stages of development. Hospitality is strong in Asheville, which boasts an impressive restaurant scene, said Rangel. The "foodie" and farm-to-table movements "are really strong here."

Similar to the way West Michigan brewers can take advantage of abundant fresh water resources, Asheville has the nearby Black Mountain aquifer to tap into. The water (and the reputation) likely helped Sierra Nevada and New Belgium breweries decide to announce facilities in Asheville this year. Oskar Blues Brewery is also locating in nearby Brevard.

Beer tourism is a big economic driver, said Rangel — something Grand Rapids is also starting to benefit from.

“Every Saturday we get a lot of beer tourists,” said Jason Spaulding, co-owner of Brewery Vivant, which opened late 2010 and is **expanding distribution this year into Illinois**. “There are a lot of people who come to Grand Rapids and make sure to hit three stops: Founders, HopCat and us.”

Despite the national recognition, Spaulding said the brewery sales are still strongest in the local market. “There’s so much pride in local beer around Grand Rapids,” he said. “People that know beer know they’ve got it pretty good here.”

In the end, despite some trash-talking by folks under the poll, there's no apparent sour grapes between the Grand Rapids and Asheville beer communities. On Monday morning, Rangel emailed Engbers an invitation to their city's Brewgrass Festival in September.

“Huge congratulations to GR,” he said. “Any town that loyal to their beer is a great place. You'll definitely be seeing some pilgrimages from Asheville up there.”

Engbers said he's "kind of glad there was a tie — it gives me a good excuse to head down to Asheville and do some events down there.”

*Email **Garret Ellison** or follow him on **Twitter**.*

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Brewery Vivant co-owner Jason Spaulding.