

Otto Frederick "Fred" Eckhardt (1926–2015)

By Tiah Edmunson-Morton

Friends and fans called Fred Eckhardt a muse, an icon, a founding father, and the “cosmic giggle of craft beer.” Based in Portland, he was an author, educator, home brewer, and beer historian known for his knowledge of beer styles and craft beer culture. He influenced home and commercial brewers, wrote extensively for local and national media, and was a founding member of the Oregon Brew Crew, based in Portland and one of the oldest and largest home brewing clubs in the country.

Otto Frederick Eckhardt was born in San Francisco on May 10, 1926. He was adopted by a family in Everett, Washington, was placed in a children’s home when he was ten, and returned to his adopted mother when he was fifteen. When he was seventeen, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. He worked as a radio operator in Okinawa during World War II and in the South Pacific during the Korean War, learning Japanese and then studying communications engineering at Everett Community College.

In 1958, Eckhardt graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in Far Eastern languages and literature. He moved to Portland, where he lived for more than sixty years with partner James Itsuo Takita, a Multnomah County Public Library reference librarian. Eckhardt worked as a professional photographer when he moved to Portland and as a swimming instructor throughout his life.

The first beer Eckhardt tasted was his adopted father’s Depression-era home brew, which he considered abysmal. While stationed in Okinawa and the South Pacific, he explored the beers produced there, typically pale lagers. When he returned to the Pacific Northwest, he began making his own wine, beer, and sake (Japanese rice beer), a hobby he maintained throughout his life.

The increasing popularity of home brewing and the accessibility of imported beers in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s affected the palates of consumers, but they needed a teacher. As microbreweries opened across the country, Eckhardt visited with brewers and owners, reported his findings, and encouraged people to visit the new establishments. He wrote hundreds of columns about beer for publications such as the *Seattle Times*, the *Oregonian*, *Celebrator*, *Zymurgy*, and *All About Beer*, and he published his own newsletters, including *Amateur Brewer*, *Listen to Your Beer*, *Talk to Your Beer*, and *Sake Connection*. Eckhardt rose to fame with *A Treatise on Lager Beers: Handbook for Americans and Canadians on Lager*, published in 1970. He released *The Essentials of Beer Style: A Catalog of Classic Beer Styles for Brewers & Beer Enthusiasts* in 1989 and *Sake (U.S.A.): A Complete Guide to American Sake, Sake Breweries and Homebrewed Sake* in 1992.

When Eckhardt published his first book, brewing at home for personal consumption was illegal. Although the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 had allowed commercial breweries to make and sell beer, the legislation left out home brewing. Although people still made beer, the restriction limited the growth of the beer culture and community, which home brewers such as Kurt Widmer and Tonya Cornett—who eventually became successful commercial brewers—thought were necessary for developing their skills. That changed in 1979 when legislation was enacted that allowed people to make beer in their homes without having to pay a federal tax, although there was a limit placed on personal beer production.

Eckhardt was a founding member of the Oregon Brew Crew, a Portland-based homebrew club established in 1979. He mentored members such as Alan Sprints (Hair of the Dog) and Lisa Morrison (Belmont Station) and led brewing workshops, beer tastings, beer and food dinners. He also taught courses on making sake and beer at Portland Community College in the 1990s.

Though Eckhardt traveled widely in his work, his dedication to sharing Northwest brewing news was significant. Throughout the 1980s, he visited new breweries as they opened, writing about Charles and Shirley Coury’s struggles with Cartwright Brewing, for example, the creativity and historic preservation that was so important to McMenamins’ business model, and the excitement of the opening of BridgePort, Widmer Brewing, and Portland Brewing. At times, he was criticized for focusing too much on Portland breweries, but his work remains a vital record of early craft brewing in Oregon.

Fred Eckhardt died on August 10, 2015. The Oregon Hops and Brewing Archives at the Oregon State University Libraries acquired his papers in 2015.

Sources

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<https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/eckhardt-fred/>