

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE BREWING INDUSTRY

Q&A with Alisa Bowens-Mercado, Owner of Rhythm Brewing, New Haven, CT



As a professional Latin rhythm dancer, Alisa Bowens-Mercado strapped on her dance shoes, glided onto the craft beer scene, and made history. She founded the first African-American (and first woman of color) owned beer brand in Connecticut in early 2018.

Her love for music, dance, and beer have played a significant role in her life. Both of Alisa's grandmothers were beer drinkers; on occasion, they could be found listening to music, dancing, and sipping on a good lager. Alisa remembers her grandmother telling her the key to success was "finding *your* rhythm in life."

Rhythm Brewing Co.'s passionate vision for the brewing industry is founded in eliminating the gap in the marketplace among underrepresented demographics. Citing significant demand for craft beer from consumers of all races and identities, Alisa and Rhythm Brewing intend to diversify—and at the same time unify—an American beer-drinking tradition.

Meanwhile, their mission is to maintain the highest quality of lagers that both women and men can produce, from recipe development and equipment to materials and carefully selected ingredients.

"Lady Lager" (as Alisa is affectionately known) brings the same passion and energy to the craft beer industry as she does to the dance floor and her community. Here are some of her answers to how she approaches the diversity challenges in brewing:

Q: Why and how is it important that the brewing industry continues to grow by increasing diversity and inclusion?

A: "We must have continuous conversations pertaining to diversity, inclusion, and equity. In a 114 billion dollar industry, people of color and women are receiving less than 0.005% total revenue. Breweries that are owned by people of color and women allow us to create a space for individuals who represent more diverse demographics. Introducing craft beer to enthusiasts from different walks of life is a win-win for the community."

Q: How do you define what you see as an opportunity in the industry for minorities?

A: “I believe that if minorities were more visible as producers and not just consumers, the [limiting] mindset of the industry will change. We look forward to opening doors, creating spaces and building more tables in the industry.”

Q: What were some of the challenges you faced while getting started in the industry, and how did you overcome them?

A: “Some of the challenges include not having enough space to be creative due to limited tank availability and brewing schedules with our startup partners. We love contract brewing as it has given us the opportunity to build and grow as a brand. We are hoping to get a physical space of our own in the near future, where we can dive into our creative realm in brewing.”



Q: Does being a black-owned/woman-owned brewery influence your approach to marketing or social media?

A: “Because we have identified an untapped market in the craft beer industry, we engage with diverse groups on our social media platforms. Our brand caters to *all* beer drinkers, so you will find that our social media engagement is fun and inclusive and includes opportunities to engage all demographics. The Rhythm brand is really inclusive and wants to promote diversity through brews—to celebrate what brings us together, rather than what pulls us apart.”

Q: What do consumers and brewers need to prioritize to prevent stagnancy in diversity initiatives and to move from awareness to action?

A: “One way to have impact is for consumers and brewers to take a united approach, such as hosting roundtable and community discussions and offering scholarships and internships in all parts of the industry to people of color. Collaborations, I believe, are another essential part of taking action in the industry. We saw this when we had the amazing opportunity to work on the Black is Beautiful global initiative. It was an experience in my brewing career that I will never forget.”

Rhythm Brewing Company, based in New Haven, CT, focuses on producing its flagship Rhythm (5.5% ABV) unfiltered lager, and Rhythm Blue (4.8% ABV), an unfiltered light lager. These modern American-style lagers combine uniquely paired hops and malts brewed for a smooth, palate-pleasing, full-flavored, unique taste. Alisa and Rhythm are excited to bring a new face and flavor to craft beer.