COOP MEMBER BREWS THE RADICALLY SUSTAINABLE “TESLA OF BEER.” NOW THE COOP JUST NEEDS TO STOCK IT.

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By Liz Welch

It was June 2020, peak-Covid, and John Midgely, the Brooklyn-based London-born art and fashion photographer was restless. He’d spent nearly four decades shooting celebs like Mos Def and Ozzy Osbourne for magazines, as well as the legendary Bethann Hardison in an iconic Gap campaign—but the industry had “changed radically,” he said over sandwiches at Park Slope’s Simple Loaf. “I was looking for a transition.”

He was in lockdown chatting about new possibilities with his cousin, Doug, who lives in London and who had worked in mergers and acquisitions for the multinational beverage company Diageo before leaving to become a consultant in the beverage indus-

try. The two share a love of lager and Doug suggested that John take an online brewing class. It was called “The Science of Brewing,” and along with how to brew beer, John learned that the malting process, which is how beer is made, uses a tremendous amount of water and energy to turn barley into malt.

“High consumption of good-quality water is characteristic of beer brewing,” John, a Coop member, explained. “More than 90% of beer is water and an efficient brewery will typically use between four and six liters of water to produce one liter of beer.”

John also learned that most of the waste happened during the malting process, as it involves germinating the barley, then making a mash and finally separating the particles from the warm sugary water to get the maltose necessary to make beer. This made him wonder: Was there a more efficient way to extract maltose from barley?

He began Googling around and quickly learned that there was: adding enzymes to the raw barley would cut out all the germinating and water waste involved in the malting steps. The result would be a “raw” beer.

John called Doug to bounce the idea off him.

“The beer industry is ripe for a renewal,” John explains. “It worked with electric cars and solar panels, which are industries that have been revolutionized as a result.” Why not beer? Doug agreed that it was worth investigating. Not long later, Cool Cousin Brewing was born.

John set up a home brewing station on the top floor of his recently renovated Bedford-Stuyvesant home. He ordered the enzymes online and started experimenting by adding them to the raw barley, and forgoing the multi-stepped malting process. It was all very exciting. There was only one problem: the beer did not taste good.

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“After three months of tinkering, I got closer with taste,” he said. “But it still needed color.” So he toasted some raw barely and tossed it into the mix, which produced the pale lager golden glow he was looking for.

By then, he had joined a Brooklyn group of home brewing beer aficionados called “Brewminaries” who regularly met up in Park Slope to share stories and taste one another’s samples. “There was a generous and bright high school teacher whom I would lean on all the time,” John said.



John was making a Kolsch lager, which has a lighter crisper taste than the pungent hop heavy IPAs that were all the rage. He continued to tinker and perfect his recipe and, once he was satisfied, even entered a few home-brewing competitions. After he

won two—and proved his hypothesis that he could make a raw beer that was delicious—he was ready to move the Cool Cousin operation beyond his home.

He first went to Strong Rope, a small local brewery in Gowanus, whose owner Jason Sahler was a big supporter of sustainability. “He uses 100% New York state ingredients and wants to help grow the industry,” John explained. Sahler connected John with Rich Michaels, a well-respected master brewer who worked at FXMat, a 500-barrel system in upstate New York that brewed Saranac Beers, among others. Rich had long been interested in making a sustainable beer and agreed to work with Cool Cousins.

“The concept of trying to make beer out of unmalted grain is not new,” Rich explained. “People have been looking at doing this for 40 years—to save both energy and cost. But no one has been able to make it taste like beer.”

Rich was intrigued by John’s recipe, and dedication. “I’ve been brewing commercially for 31 years,” he explained. “Brewers are sustainably-minded, so we are always interested in changing our practices. There have been breweries who have tried to do this but have struggled to make it taste like good beer.”

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By August 2023, they had a Kolsch lager that they felt was ready for prime time. John began reaching out to potential customers and Cool Cousin’s first sale was to Dan Barber’s acclaimed Blue Hill at Stone Barns restaurant in Tarrytown, New York.

“I emailed the website and was invited to bring a sample,” John said. That lead to his first sale—ten cases—and the restaurant remains Cool Cousin’s most consistent customer. Currently, the brand is available in 35 places throughout New York State includ-

ing Total Wine in Westbury, Long Island. But shockingly, not the Coop.

“As long as Cool Cousin can work with a distributor, we’d be happy to stock the brand,” says Kusi Merello, the Coop’s beer buyer and a receiving coordinator. Known for its eclectic and wide ranging beer selection, the Coop sells more than a hundred brands of beer. Their best seller is Brooklyn-based Sixpoint, but they also offer small independent brands like the women-owned TaLea. Kusi and her co-beer buyer Brian Robinson are constantly on the lookout for new brands to put on the shelves and Cool Cousins certainly aligns with the Coop’s sustainability values. The issue, Kusi maintains, is how the beer is sold.

“The loading zone is not just ours, so we have to consolidate our purchase through one of the six distributors. Otherwise it is too much work for individuals,” she explains.

This basic rule is summarized in the Coop’s “new product consideration” protocol, which states:

“Product must be sold through a distributor. While we understand that many independent food producers do not use distributors, there are several important reasons for this requirement. Direct shipments increase the number of orders that have to be placed, the number of deliveries to the store, the number of invoices that have to be verified and received, and the number of invoices that have to be processed through our bookkeepers. Additionally, we are beyond capacity with the traffic from the hundreds of deliveries we already receive each week. We seldom add a distributor to bring just one or two products. However, we do *occasionally* make exceptions for local independent producers selling a *completely unique* product.”

John has tried to get Cool Cousin distributed through one of the six distributors based in New York City, but it is not easy. “Most want you to be selling at scale,” he explains. Hopefully, this will change as the company continues to grow. It just added a hazy IPA to its offerings.

And yet, one could argue that Cool Cousin *is* completely unique. At least according to journalist Don Tse, “the baron of beer” who reached out to Rich Michaels in August 2023 looking for anyone who was brewing with enzymes as he was looking to do a story on sustainable beer.

“We were the only one,” John said.

The story, “This New York Brewery Hopes to Revolutionize the Way Beer Is Made” ran in Forbes magazine on September 2, 2023 with the opening line: “New York’s Cool Cousin Brewing is the first commercial brewing company in America to make beer entirely from unmalted barley, saving water and carbon dioxide with each brew.”

Proof of John’s hypothesis: there is space in the beer industry for raw sustainable beer. And soon, one hopes, there will be space in the Coop’s shelves for the product.

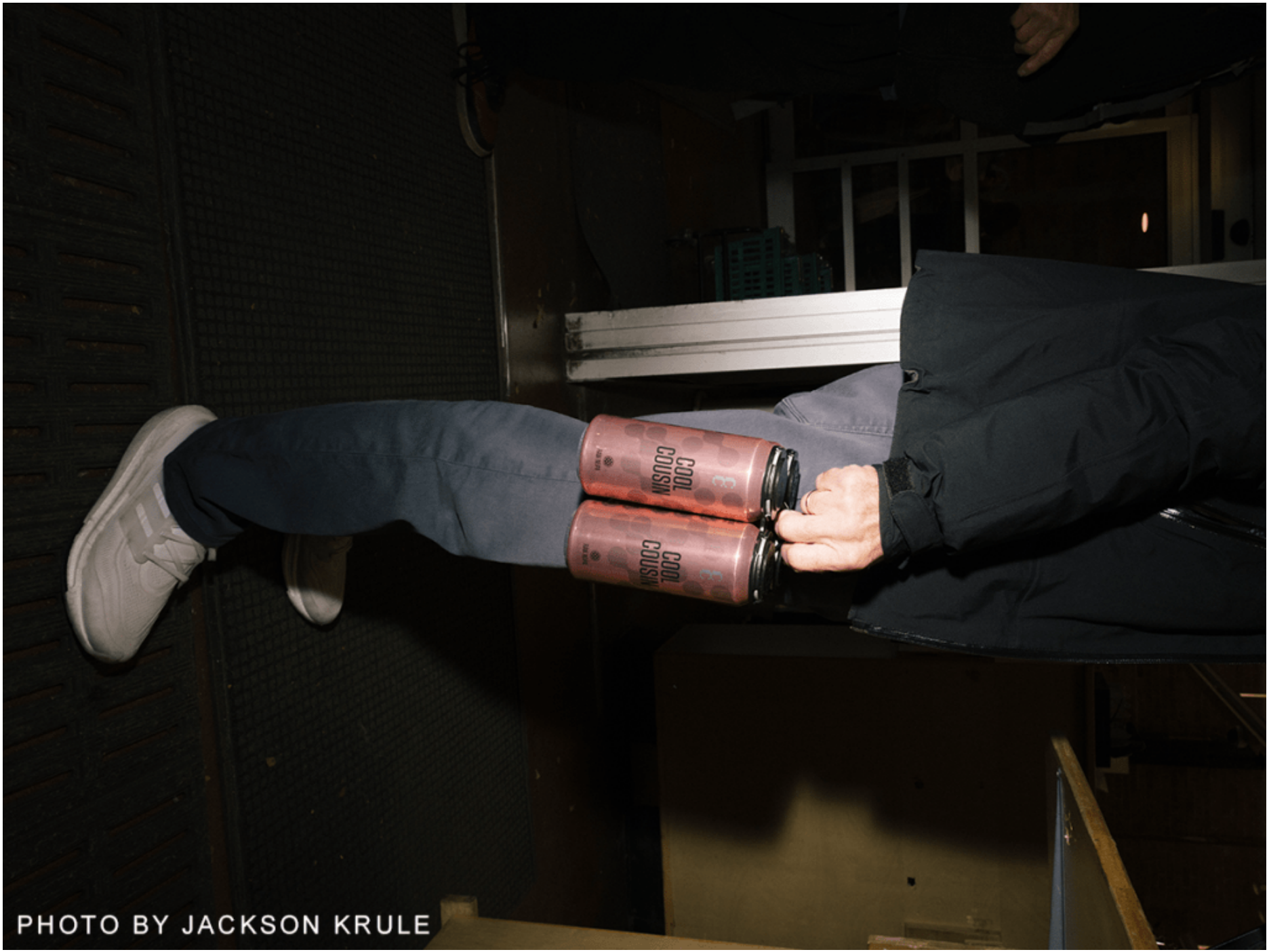


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Liz Welch re-joined the Gazette *as a reporter in August 2023 after a hiatus. She is a longtime journalist and author/collaborator whose work can be seen at http://www.lizwelch.com.*