

## Selling Fresh L.A. Beer Online, One Bottle at a Time

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By Sarah Bennett



In mid-March, El Segundo Brewing Company bottled the latest batch of its citrusy, fruity Hammerland Double IPA. Within a few days, it arrived (along with a branded pint glass) at the homes of around 40 beer nerds, all of whom live out of state.

El Segundo's beers, which usually are distributed only in Southern California, were delivered to these far-flung places as a result of a single L.A.-area beer retailer: the internet bottle shop Inside the Cellar.

Based out of the industrial city of Santa Fe Springs, Inside the Cellar has since 2013 been selling a small-but-curated rotating selection of craft beer bottles and cans through its website.

Now, through its 6-month-old Freshies Club, the shop is guaranteeing shipment of local, hoppy beers from several L.A. breweries the day they are bottled, circumventing traditional distribution networks and letting customers around the country drink like Southern Californians.

"We were at the brewery in El Segundo when they bottled it at 2 p.m., and then we drove directly to FedEx and had the boxes all out that day," says Inside the Cellar founder Daniel Munoz, who runs the business along with his longtime friend, warehouse and shipping manager Farhaad Esfandiary. "It gets there faster than even if they had distro."

Inside the Cellar is one of several SoCal-based e-commerce websites that are changing the way local beer is getting into the hands of out-of-state fans.

For years, if someone in Des Moines wanted to try a small-batch beer made in San Diego, they had to have someone who lives in San Diego go to the brewery or store, buy it and mail it — and risk breaking the law (it's illegal to ship alcohol without a license).

An underground network of beer-trading emerged to deal with this distribution gap, which is where Munoz says he first got the idea to launch Inside the Cellar.

"We were traders first," he says. "When I first started trading, I would tell them to just send me a case of local stuff. I wanted to try everything that wasn't from here."

That's why Munoz says he's making a special effort to carry not just the sought-after beers (from breweries like Cascade, The Bruery and Anchorage) but also bottles from breweries like King Harbor Brewing, Strand Brewing and Smog City Brewing; customers can pad their orders to qualify for free shipping — and end up with beers they might not have come to the site intending to buy.

Inside the Cellar is also unique among online beer retailers in that the web sales are not an offshoot of a storefront (as is the case with Craft Beer Kings and Craft City). This allows Munoz and Esfandiary to be particular about the beers they carry — they only have around 100 beers in their system — and to buy smaller amounts that are quickly sent out with orders.

The entire operation, which ships around 25 orders each day, exists on just a few shelves inside the temperature-controlled warehouse of Specialty Cellars, a parent company that specializes in the importing and wholesale sale of wine.

“We keep it small on purpose,” Munoz says.

In addition to programs like Freshies, wine pairing add-ons and the soon-to-be-launched Beer of the Month club, the company also puts on an annual beer event, the proceeds from which are donated to a different nonprofit each year. The next one, on May 30, is a mini beer festival with eight breweries and pizza pairings. “It's an interesting time for beer right now,” Munoz says.

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