

"The Story Behind the Blue Ribbon" by Jordy Clements
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Pabst is an American success story in the truest sense. Founded by a German, and recently sold to a Greek, it's a brewery that brews no beer, as it's under contract with an American/Canadian/South African company (MillerCoors), partially headquartered in London. Pabst is also a resurgent brand, and the story behind its most famed asset, the iconic Pabst Blue Ribbon, is just as convoluted, and as quintessentially American, as the company's bricolage past.

Attempting to untangle the Blue Ribbon's many threads brings us first to Milwaukee. Like many US brewers, Pabst owes its heritage to the influx of German immigrants that found their way to the upper Midwest in the mid-19th century. Jacob Best, whose surname might help explain the seemingly outrageous claim made by another Milwaukee beer, emigrated in 1844 and soon established the Empire Brewery.

With the help of his sons (two of whom would later defect to found the rival Plank Road Brewery, eventually sold to Frederick Miller of Miller Brewing), Best turned the Empire Brewery, now called Best and Co., into a success. Upon retirement, he transferred control to his son Phillip, and he in turn passed it to his son-in-law, steamboat captain Frederick Pabst.

At the time, the brewery's most popular beer was Best Select. Though Frederick soon renamed the enterprise Pabst Brewing Company, he continued to produce the popular beer under the Pabst Select label. And from 1882 to 1916, the company tied blue ribbons around their Pabst Select bottles. But why?

Before answering that, let's fast forward a little. On May 26 of this year, Greek-born investor C. Dean Metropoulos purchased Pabst (along with Old Style, Schlitz, and a few other beers) for a quarter of a billion dollars. Metropoulos, known for reviving such exciting brands as Vlasic Pickles, Bumble Bee Tuna, and Chef Boyardee, does not know anything about brewing beer. This is convenient, as Pabst does not actually brew any.

As stated above, Pabst actually contracts MillerCoors to make the beer, a common practice in the brewing industry. When it comes to making "American Lager beer" (i.e. cheap swill), the economics of scale make it prohibitive to compete with the major brewers. If you are drinking inexpensive, mass produced beer, it is likely brewed by a giant international company like SABMiller, Molson Coors Brewing Company, or Anheuser-Busch InBev (who control 25% of the global market alone).

In short, the same few breweries control the taste of most of the beer. Not really that different from the many Best's and Miller's before, is it? Today's Pabst is, for all intents and purposes, a marketing company, a virtual brewer, years ago having stopped actually making the beer they sell.

Now back to the Blue Ribbon. As much as anyone can figure, Pabst started placing the ribbons around bottle necks to signify that it was an "award winning beer." The beer became successful, and Pabst started ordering blue ribbon by the mile, apparently keeping one turn-of-the-century factory working around the clock for a year to fill a 10 million yard order.

To this day, labeling on PBR cans famously claim that, "This is the original Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer. Nature's choicest products provide its prized flavor. Only the finest of hops and grains are used. Selected as America's Best in 1893."

There are only two small problems with this. First, Pabst had started using the ribbon in 1882, 11 years before being selected as “America's Best” in 1893. Second, the claim of America's Best is a reference to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, where accounts vary widely as to *anyone* winning. Some reports state that organizers frustrated vendors by awarding bronze medals to multiple breweries for “essential excellence” rather than judging them on their “relative merits.”

It would seem that Pabst's Blue Ribbon follows an axiom more in line with Olympic figure skating than rigorous taste competitions: it's easier to proclaim yourself the winner when you're the one doing the judging. Most likely, Pabst gave themselves the Blue Ribbon, and the public responded by buying the beer, just the first in a shrewd series of moves the brewer/marketing company used to hone its image.

In 1958, after having surpassed the 100 million barrel mark, Pabst added a commemorative red stripe to its logo, further cementing it as “the beer of dubious, colored honors” (not to be confused with a similarly crummy/well marketed Jamaican beer).

In 1986, Pabst made an iconic turn in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Star villain Dennis Hopper, a PBR loyalist, screams its name at a Heineken drinker. Victory for the people!

In 2004, Oregon State students even formed a company sponsored PBR fraternity, basing the unofficial frat on the beer's iconic acronym.

Pabst hasn't significantly changed its labeling for over a century, and the Blue Ribbon is its calling card, despite not really signifying much, if anything. Compared with other large American breweries, who seemingly revamp their image every few years, Pabst is relatively stable, and that appeals to a certain customer base.

In its own way, the Blue Ribbon was nothing more than the “Vented Wide Mouth Lid,” “Cold-Activated Can,” or “Vortex Bottle” of its day. Through a combination of good marketing and luck, it has recently experienced a rebirth, playing off that stable, traditional image.

More than anything owing to its recent success is that fact that Pabst somehow became synonymous with “hipsters.” Though that word's cultural clock is ticking (my guess: people will stop using it long before Pabst stops selling brew), PBR is a brand that shows no signs of going anywhere. It survived Prohibition as a lucrative cheese business, eventually sold to Kraft, and similarly weathered the light beer wars of the 70s and 80s. Is outlasting skinny jeans really going to be that much of an accomplishment?

Beer makers will continue to use whatever means they can to convince consumers that their beer is somehow superior to the next guy's. I, for one, have always like the Blue Ribbon. And I'm not alone.

PBR is quite popular in Omaha, perhaps nowhere more so than the strip of Benson bars on Maple Street known for music, beer, and a younger, bohemian bent. Marty, a bartender at Jake's Cigars & Spirits, estimates they go through 18-20 cases of PBR tall boys (the name for the larger 16oz cans) a week, using as many as 43 cases in a night during Benson block parties. Asked why Pabst is so popular, Marty says it's, “good,” before pausing. “...And cheap.”

Just down the street from Jake's and The Waiting Room is the Sydney, a trio of bars who likely sell as

much Blue Ribbon as anyone in the city, possibly even the state (along with Dundee's 49er, where cheap pitchers of draught PBR flow freely). Kenny, a bartender at the Sydney, states that "it's definitely the cheapest beer we have," and figures PBR's rise in popularity coincided with price hikes from Old Style.

So, in the end, does the Blue Ribbon, and its popularity, stand for cheap price or good quality? Exactly.