

Houston Chronicle - November 11, 2019

Brewers battle for Shiner Bock's niche corner of craft beer

A Houston beer brand. The world's largest brewer. Texas' best-known craft brewer. Add some fighting words and you have a marketing clash that is taking on overtones of the Texas Revolution. The battlefield is Shiner, the home of Shiner Bock, where signs at a recent music festival blared, rather indiscreetly, "There's a new Bock in town." Billboards around the tiny town (pop. 2,171) also showed up to promote Crawford Bock, a beer launched by Karbach Brewing, a once-independent Houston brewer now owned by Anheuser-Busch InBev, or ABInBev.

To the Spoetzl Brewery, the maker of Shiner Bock, and local craft beer connoisseurs, the advertisements were a direct attack on their home turf — and the Texas craft brewing community at large. Spoetzl last week moved to rally its supporters with a reminder of another fight that pitted Texans against a powerful foe, publishing an open letter in the local newspaper that recalled the Battle of Gonzales, the opening skirmish of the Texas Revolution where a famous flag in the war for independence from Mexico was flown.

"This is a huge company with deep pockets seeking to force its way into our town," Spoetzl said in its advertisement. "To the drinkers who love Shiner, we say, 'Cheers' and to the giant breweries, as our friends down the road once said, 'Come and Take it.'" The marketing feud is part of a battle over the niche market for bock beer, a strong, dark lager. The independently produced Shiner Bock has dominated the market in Texas and across the country for more than 100 years, and Anheuser-Busch, the U.S. subsidiary of ABInBev since its 2008 merger with the Belgian company InBev, wants a piece of it.