

Australian Brewers Are Making Beer From Yeast Found on a Shipwreck

A new porter-style ale gets its funk from a 220-year old specimen

By [Marissa Fessenden](#)

smithsonian.com

May 7, 2018 12:32PM

35201113

In 1796, a ship called the *Sydney Cove* set sail from Calcutta, India, en route to the colony of Port Jackson, New South Wales, bearing cargo of tea, ceramics, rice, tobacco and alcohol. But the *Cove* sank the following February in the seas of the Bass Strait between Tasmania and Australia.

What was a tragedy more than two centuries ago has led to a fascinating story today. In June, four decades after the wreck of the *Cove* was discovered, an Australian brewery is releasing a beer brewed with yeast found in the underwater dig site, [reports Johnny Lieu for Mashable](#).

In 1977, amateur divers discovered [the wreck](#) on the seafloor near Preservation Island, [according to the James Squire brewery](#) in Camperdown, Australia. More than a decade later, marine archeologist Mike Nash led a government-manned salvage expedition to bring some of the ship's contents to the surface. The excavation included "Chinese ceramics, Indian pottery, bottles, parts of the ship such as the rudder and rigging, leather hides and footwear, and foodstuff items such as animal bones, peppercorns and tobacco," not to mention 37 glass bottles. Twenty-two of those vessels remained sealed, contents untouched, according to the [Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery](#), which keeps the artifacts in its permanent collection.

In 1993, experts from the [Australian Wine Research Institute](#) took samples from some of the sealed bottles and determined they were beer and wine, the museum writes. David Thurrowgood, a museum conservator and chemist, had a brainstorm about that find: "I thought we might be able to culture yeast and recreate a beer that hasn't been on the planet for 220 years," he said [to the James Squire brewery's website](#).

Thurrowgood led a team to reproduce the historic brew. Scientists from Australia, Belgium, France and Germany collaborated to revive yeast cells found in one of the bottles and brew beer from the microbes, [reported Tom Metcalfe for Livescience.com](#) in 2016. The yeast the scientists found was a rare hybrid strain different from strains used to brew ale today. Their first batch consisted of just a few bottles and had a cider-like taste.

The experimental batch generated interest from several breweries. James Squire's Malt Shovel Brewery stepped up to use the yeast in a beer for modern palates, [reports Matthew Denholm for The Australian](#). "This particular yeast was very temperamental and had a thirst for life, so it took a lot of trial and error to find the right balance," says Haydon Morgan, the

brewery's head brewer. "After a lot of different recipes, we decided it was perfect for a porter style."

The final brew "has hints of blackcurrent and spices" and is "a little bit funky," reports Lieu for *Mashable*. The brewery itself calls the beer "The Wreck Preservation Ale" and describes it as "dark, malty, spicy and stormy."

A portion of beer sales will fund future research of the *Sydney Cove* collection.

The brewery is well suited to reviving a historic beer — the name [James Squire](#) comes from Australia's first brewer. Born in 1754 in Kingston-on-Thames, Squire was sent to the British penal colony of New South Wales in 1787 after stealing five hens and four cocks from a neighbor, [according to the brewery](#). That turn of events was far from unfortunate for Squire. In the colony he became a celebrated brewer, a constable and community icon. The [James Squire brewery](#), established under a different name in 1988, is named in his honor.

Now his descendants and their neighbors can raise a glass of beer brewed with yeast that once fermented back in James Squire's day.