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Hi-Wire Brewing in Asheville,
North Carolina, in the aftermath of
Hurricane Helene in September 2024.



AFTER THE FLOOD

Asheville's resilient beer scene rebuilds after Hurricane Helene.

Story by JOSHUA M. BERNSTEIN



One warm May morning in Asheville, North Carolina, cold-brew coffee in hand, I left my hotel in downtown Asheville and walked downhill toward the River Arts District. I ambled past restaurants serving fluffy biscuits, flower-filled yards, a bands tour bus, and construction workers building new apartments. The stroll was so idyllic that I nearly forgot about the flooding.

Late last September, the French Broad River overflowed with swollen stormwaters borne by Hurricane Helene. They inundated art studios, galleries, restaurants, and breweries such as Hi-Wire, where plaques mark the water's bewildering height. The warehouse took on 15 feet of water and mud, destroying cans, finished beer, and essential equipment like the keg-filled cold box that lifted off the ground and tilted sideways, mangling the glycol chilling system. The bustling beer garden became a barren, debris-strewn sandlot. A sour scent perfumed the ruins.

"We aged our sour beer here in wooden barrels," says Adam Charnack, co-founder and CEO, as he tours me around the expansive warehouse. "It spilled everywhere." But by mid-May, the wreckage was gone, repairs made, and the Hi-Wire team reopened the beer garden to the public on May 24. The taproom marquee featured soon-to-be-served beverages, including the flagship Hi-Pitch IPA, Hurricane Sour, and citrusy Mountain Water. "We'll get through all this and land in a better spot, but there will be breweries that won't and that's sad," Charnack says. Hi-Wire distributes beer in eight states and operates locations as far away as Louisville, Kentucky. The brewery is selling beer, yes, but a bigger mission is to "sell Asheville."

One year ago, Asheville needed no sales pitch, especially for its beer. Since Highland Brewing opened in 1994, the progressive, artsy city in western North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains steadily blossomed into one of America's preeminent beer destinations, punching above its per-capita weight for a population of around 100,000. About 55 breweries operated in greater Asheville, including East Coast outposts of New Belgium and Sierra Nevada, helping Asheville become a four-time winner of the Beer City U.S.A. poll. "We've got a beautiful community that's rich in breweries," says Andrew Ross, a co-owner of The Whale, which operates three Asheville beer bars.

After powering through the pandemic, the beer scene's resilience faced another unforeseen stress test last fall. Hurricane Helene gathered strength in the Gulf of Mexico, reaching Category 4 intensity before making landfall and charting a ruinous route across the Southeast. Western North Carolina and the Asheville area suffered landslides, flash floods, widespread destruction, and a lack of electricity, cell service, and potable water. Brewing fresh IPAs, much less flushing toilets, was unfeasible for the future—or maybe forever. The storm's malignant forces reduced to rubble both Brewery Cursus Keme and New Origin Brewing.

One year later, how are Asheville's breweries rebounding? I first visited in 2009, reporting on the town's ascendant scene for *Imbibe*. Then as now, the story couldn't be reported from a distance. So I flew to Asheville and spent around three days talking with dozens of brewers, bartenders, brewery owners, and beer drinkers. Some conversations are better in person, preferably over a cold beer.



I arrived in Asheville on a sunny weekday morning and strolled downtown, nothing amiss except for excess humidity. After grabbing grits, I headed to DSSOLVR brewery to meet Vince Tursi, a co-founder. The brewery opened in 2019 and embraces surreal imagery (think: aliens, skeletons, cult-like symbolism), boldly flavored hazy IPAs and sour ales, and a community commitment. After any heavy rainstorm, it's not uncommon for locals to find sediment in their water. "We'll give clean water to people," Tursi says.

As the storm bore down, DSSOLVR posted on Instagram, advertising free water. He came to work on Friday, September 27, finding running water and electricity. "Inexplicably, we were on the one block of downtown that didn't lose power," Tursi says. But by early afternoon, the water began losing pressure. Unbeknownst to all, the water main washed away; eight weeks would pass before Asheville again had drinkable water. Donations of canned water, diapers, clothes, and dry goods started arriving to DSSOLVR. It became a distribution hub, "almost like a grocery store," Tursi says. He then spearheaded the Higher Calling hazy IPA relief project. Breweries anywhere could sign up to brew the recipe, then donate proceeds (around \$190,000 as of mid-May) to a nonprofit overseen by the North Carolina Brewers Guild. "The community drove its own support," he says.

Chris Whaley and his wife, Jessica, own Whaley Farm Brewery in Old Fort, North Carolina, about 25 miles east of Asheville. The taproom opened in 2022 with Appalachian farm beers, British-style cask ales, and European-inspired lagers, and the town of 800 embraced it as a neighborhood pub. When Hurricane Helene hit, the Whaleys were cut off from outside contact for 48 hours, until they shimmied across a fallen tree and caught a ride to their wrecked brewery. Neighbors had proactively shut off a leaking gas line and later scooped out mud. The taproom reopened in June, serving beer brewed on a small borrowed system. "It's a small and intimate community where everybody is just looking to help," Whaley says.

Hurricane Helene was the second calamity to befall Asheville's brewing and hospitality industry in the last five years. The pandemic forced breweries into survival mode, pivoting to stay in business while maintaining safe distances. The federal government provided fiscal assistance to businesses and employees. The hurricane created the inverse. Federal aid was meager, and insurance companies

The aftermath and recovery following Hurricane Helene. Top row: Hi-Wire Brewing in the RiverArts District. Middle row: Distributing water to the community at DSSOLVR brewery (left); the soft re-opening of Hi-Wire in May 2025 (center and right). Bottom row: Whaley Farm Brewery in Old Fort, North Carolina, with owners Jessica and Chris Whaley.





largely refused to pay claims. “If it has anything to do with a flood, then it’s not covered,” says Jess Reiser, CFO and co-founder of Burial Beer in Asheville.

Right after the storm, the absence of cellular service prevented locals from connecting to comprehend the full extent of damage. “The lack of communication was such an added stressor.” Bit by bit, people emerged from homes and neighborhoods and headed to Burial—the taproom offering camaraderie and connection. “We started spreading the word that we’ll be here again tomorrow,” Reiser says. “More people showed up, and that’s when we started cooking the food that we had.” Burial also became a supply hub, partnering with grassroots nonprofit Each One Teach One Through Food to distribute supplies to underserved communities. “While there was immense heartbreak, the hurricane was this beautiful coming together of helping and serving each other,” Reiser says.

As natural disasters grow in number and scale, breweries are increasingly finding themselves playing a support role. “We’ve unfortunately had experience,” says Brian Grossman, chief brewer and second-generation owner of Sierra Nevada, sitting in his office at their brewery location in Mills River, about 20 miles south of Asheville. In 2018, the Camp Fire consumed more than 150,000 acres of Northern California’s Butte County, near the brewery’s Chico headquarters, destroying employees’ homes. Sierra Nevada provided clothes for evacuees, served meals, set up a relief fund, and created a charitable IPA. “There’s no right way to respond to disasters, per se, and everyone is still trying to figure it out,” Grossman says.

Sierra Nevada’s Asheville-area facility escaped major flooding, and the brewery tackled a priority list to keep its fermenters cool and establish lines of communication. “It turns out that if you stand on one of our fermenters, it works okay to get a cell signal,” Grossman says, laughing. With the brewery buttoned up, Sierra Nevada began aiding the region by donating food and funds to relief organizations, hosting a charity concert, and earmarking a portion of Celebration IPA sales to the NC Craft Brewers Foundation nonprofit.

Fellow breweries also received aid. While Sierra Nevada’s wells couldn’t produce enough potable water to fill everyone’s tanks, the brewery helped Highland restart brewing by providing fresh pitches of yeast, which the brewery lost when its power went out. Sierra Nevada also helped wash and clean 122 mud-coated kegs that Zillicoah Beer excavated outside its rubble-strewn brewery.



Brothers Jonathan and Jeremy Chassner and friend Johnathan Parks founded Zillicoah in 2017 with a suite of farmhouse ales and agreeable lagers that fast made it a local favorite, especially for its riverfront location in Woodfin, just northwest of downtown Asheville. “I don’t know anybody in town that didn’t love going to Zillicoah and drinking beer

The flooding and aftermath at Zillicoah Beer Co. in Woodfin, with the French Broad River in a more peaceful condition (left, second from top). Bottom center: Zillicoah founders (from left) Johnathan Parks, Jeremy Chassner, and Jonathan Chassner.

while sitting in the sun by the river,” says Kyle McKenzie, head brewer at Terra Nova Beer in Asheville.

On September 27, the French Broad sent six feet of feral floodwaters into the brewery, and oak foudres became battering rams that blew open doors. Swirling waters swept away the brewery’s interior, including the walk-in cooler containing every ounce of inventory, the walls jaggedly splayed open to create an unwanted view. “You could stand by the river and look straight through to the parking lot,” Jeremy says. “This place was a war zone.”

I met the Chassner brothers one morning at Zillicoah, where they were at work on their singular mission: rebuilding. “The three of us sat down and had to decide, is this something we wanted again?” Jeremy says. They understood the location’s risks, “but this is our home.” The river is everything to the brewery. *Zillicoah* is the Cherokee name for the French Broad River, and the brewery’s logo is a Z bisected by a flowing river. “It’s been there since the beginning,” Jeremy says, showing me the Zillicoah logo tattooed on his arm.

Rebuilding required marshalling resources, especially since insurance paid nothing. “We fought it and they said, ‘Nope,’” Jeremy says. Grants, community fundraisers, a GoFundMe campaign that netted \$120,000, and strategic cash reserves financed construction and equipment. “We always try to have cash on hand for the oh-shit moment,” Jeremy says. “We never could’ve imagined this oh-shit moment.” As of early June, the buildout is around 90 percent complete, fresh beer is fermenting in tanks, and Zillicoah is on target for an August reopening. Some aesthetic wooden walls, built from two trailers of pallets donated by Sierra Nevada, feature illuminated shadow boxes filled with muddy bottles pulled from storm muck. The boxes sit six feet high. “They’re right at the flood line,” Jeremy says.

When floodwaters receded, breweries faced a logistical scramble to source, paradoxically, more water. Mark Goodwin, a co-founder and director of fermentation at Cellarest Beer Project, began trucking in clean brewing water from Burning Blush Brewery in Mills River. “I just felt lucky that we were even functioning,” says Goodwin, whose brewery in the West Asheville neighborhood suffered minimal storm damage.

Wicked Weed Brewing began bringing in tanks for water from as far afield as Georgia to package beer, saving an estimated 70 percent of the beer in its tanks. The brewery, which is owned by Anheuser-Busch, operates four facilities around Asheville. Overseeing them can be a logistical juggle. But because each part of the city was impacted differently by the flooding, the geographic spread became a post-storm asset.

“We were able to use resources from each facility,” says Ryan Guthy, a co-founder. One location became the communication hub, while the Funkatorium—its sour-focused taproom downtown—served as a resource hub for the nonprofit World Central Kitchen, which provides food relief during crises. Water returned sooner at the sour-beer production facility, and Jen Currier, the head of mixed culture and experimental brewing, spent her days filling tankers and totes with water. “I had the silliest two months,” Currier says. “I would show up at, like, 6 a.m. and open a water valve. I spent 10 hours a day just looking at a flow meter.”

Wedge Brewing's two locations in the River Arts District flooded during the storm. One brewery took on 14 feet of water—"My tanks were floating like a Jenga game," says Tim Schaller, who founded Wedge in 2008. He outsourced beer production to a Charlotte brewery and hired "the expensive people" to help reopen its Wedge Studios location by Halloween. "It was really good for the community because it gave people a place to go," Schaller says. Prior to the flood, Wedge's clientele was a 50-50 mix of locals and tourists. "But since we've reopened, it's mostly locals."

People often take a favorite brewery, restaurant, or bar for granted. They'll be there forever, right? The flood led many Asheville residents to re-embrace beloved breweries. "As soon as we opened the doors at our brewery taproom, the community showed up," says Nikki Mitchell, vice president of brand development at Highland. Be it buying beer to go or bringing the family for an afternoon on the brewery's 40-acre campus, "people showed up to support in whatever way they could. It felt similar to when we reopened after Covid." Sierra Nevada also saw a shift in its customers' zip codes. Prior to the flood, the destination brewery's guest makeup was 70 percent tourist and 30 percent local. But in the months following storm, the clientele was about 80 percent local. "The support that the community has given us is very unique," Grossman says.



More than local support is needed. Tourism is the local economy's lifeblood, contributing nearly \$3 billion to the city and Buncombe County in 2023 and generating 29,000 jobs, according to Explore Asheville. One in seven jobs is related to tourism, and the minor-league baseball team is named the Asheville Tourists. Hurricane Helene also hit at the worst possible economic moment: peak fall for leaf peeping. "The ecosystem is built on tourism," Tursi says, and "we lost leaf-peeping season in its entirety."

Tourism dropped precipitously following the storm. The city needed to feed, house, and take care of its own. Even though most restaurants and taprooms are now welcoming customers again, there remains a lingering misperception that Asheville is a no-go zone. During a May event in Charlotte, about two hours southeast of Asheville, Guthy of Wicked Weed spoke to hundreds of people. "Many didn't know Asheville reopened," he says. (Wicked Weed's main taproom reopened about seven weeks post-storm, while the Funkatorium reopened in May.)

For breweries, a tourism decline predated Helene. Breweries put Asheville on the map for beer drinkers, but now most every city is, to some extent, a beer city. "From my vantage point, the beer tourism dynamic has been waning," says Reiser of Burial. Maybe it was just a slow week in May, but the taprooms were pretty quiet. I never waited for a seat or a beer. "It's tough. I'd be lying to tell you it's not," says Ross from the Whale. Its locations in West and East Asheville remain lively spots for locals, but its downtown outpost in the South Slope neighborhood—Asheville's brewery epicenter—can be sleepy. "Everyone's a little nervous about the future and our sustained recovery. We need to find a way to get everyone back to Asheville," Ross says.

In March 2024, metal-inspired TRVE Brewing of Denver opened a second brewery in Asheville, in Eurisko Beer's former South Slope home. Prior to the storm, the brewery wasn't hitting hoped-for sales numbers. The brewery shuttered both its Asheville and Denver taprooms in July. Absent tourism, "it's pretty tough to support this many breweries," says says TRVE founder Nick Nunns.

The storm's economic impact reverberated beyond taprooms. About half of Riverbend Malt House's brewery customers are in North Carolina, and a "good chunk is in Asheville," says Brent Manning, the founder and chief strategy officer. "In some cases, our brewery customers were physically not there." The sales team canvassed for new clients elsewhere. A brewery might buy 500 pounds for a one-off batch, but that paled compared to key accounts that purchased multiple pallets of malt weekly. "It was a big hole in the boat," Manning says.

Seeking silver linings amid devastation is difficult, but one positive is that local breweries can reinvent taprooms. Hi-Wire amplified the murals in its RAD beer garden and added more comfortable seating, plus golf simulators to create a "fun zone" vibe, Charnack says. The Wedge's second location still remains closed, so Schaller plans to sell salvaged brewing equipment, cut down on square footage, and add monthly "outdoor music" concerts—impossible before, due to a small movie theater's co-location in the building. It's now gone. "There's always an opportunity," he says.

Recovery requires an all-encompassing effort to push forward while not dwelling deeply on the past. "It's still overwhelming every single day, but we've learned to live at a higher vibration," says Jeremy Chassner of Zillicoah. There's little time for reflection or processing when you're racing to reopen and ring up much-needed sales after nearly a year of nothing. "I don't know many small businesses that can get by a year with no revenue," he says.

Most breweries are small businesses, and small businesses are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters. More than 40 percent fail to reopen, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and nearly 30 percent that do reopen will close in the following two years. "Small businesses drive our economy in Asheville," Reiser says. No city is static, existing in a constant state of evolution as buildings go up, buildings go down, and bars, restaurants, and breweries disappear and appear. Asheville isn't the same city I first visited more than 15 years ago, and it will be different in the next decade as it charts a new post-Helene future.

What's unwavering, I found after my visit, is the city's freewheeling, fun-loving vibe and commitment to community. And the beer? Better than ever, setting a high bar that's waiting for people to bend elbows and raise pints. "There's always been this spirit of camaraderie and creativity in the Asheville beer scene," Tursi says. "The goal is to keep that torch lit." ■

Top row: Wicked Weed Brewing distributed free hot meals after the flood. Middle: The River Arts District as seen during the flood. Bottom row: Wicked Weed Brewing's Funkatorium in downtown Asheville reopened in May.

