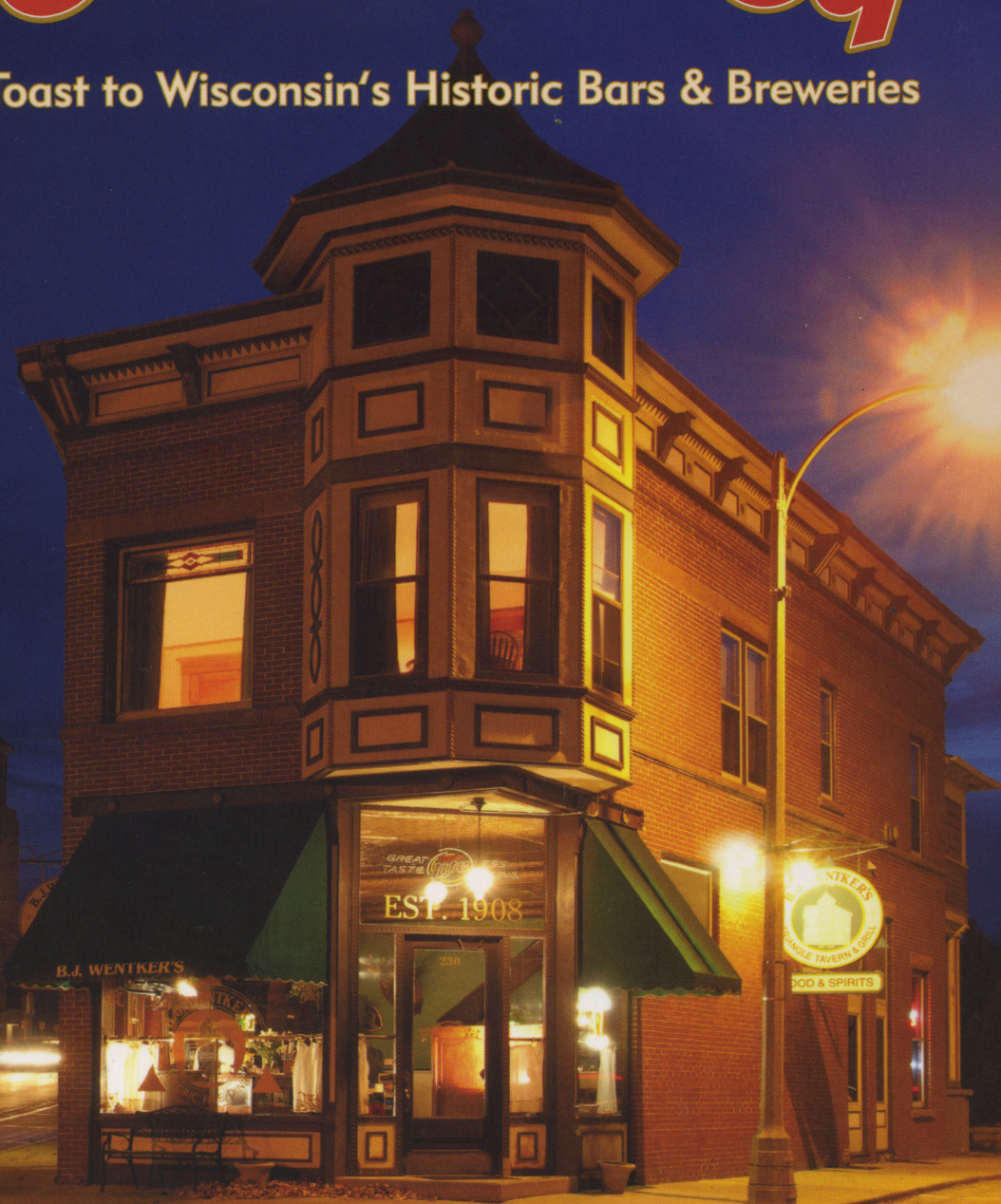


# Bottoms Up

A Toast to Wisconsin's Historic Bars & Breweries



Jim Draeger & Mark Speltz  
photographs by Mark Fay

Places along the Way

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places where time seems suspended, and appreciate, as we do, the power of a historic space to evoke a deep understanding of the time and events that created it.

Lounge collected over-the-top assemblages of kitsch, drawing customers who came to appreciate the oddity of a one-of-a-kind creation. Some rode a passing trend like disco dancing or the short-lived fascination with fern bars, whose natural, unstained wood and extensive use of plants were responses to the growing popularity of the environmental movement. These fad bars were ultimately outcompeted by chains like T.G.I. Friday's and Applebee's.

In an era defined by what economists call "market fragmentation," gays and lesbians looked to have their own gathering places as well. Open hostility and bigotry against gays was commonplace, and bars known to be frequented by homosexuals were often police targets with little community outcry. This changed on June 28, 1969, when police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City's Greenwich Village. Scholars frequently cite the resulting riots as the first instance in American history of homosexuals fighting back against government persecution.

### ◀ Barefoot Charlie ▶



Bartender Barefoot Charlie posed in postcards marketed to tourists. Collection of Jim Draeger

**The charisma and charm of the person behind the bar** are a big part of the success of any bar. Wisconsin has had legions of colorful bartenders, but none was more colorful than the legendary Barefoot Charlie.

Charles "Barefoot Charlie" Haase was a self-made man, an entrepreneur, and former lumberjack who ran a popular tavern and restaurant just south of Land O' Lakes on Highway 45. A shameless self-promoter, Barefoot Charlie earned his nickname because of his penchant for going without footwear year-round—something he exploited for publicity by showing up anywhere from Land O' Lakes to Milwaukee unshod and clad in buckskin.

In the 1940s Haase opened a one-room tavern, which he later expanded to include a restaurant, dance hall, and museum. In celebration of the Northwoods, he built the structure of rough-hewn logs, selecting gnarled and twisted limbs—some of which he had purposely bent as saplings—to provide the decorative accents like bar stools, shelves, and tables. The floor was pieced together of round slices of cedar log, and Haase built around several pine trees on-site, allowing them to grow straight through the roof. Part museum of oddities, his tavern drew curious vacationers looking for a memorable experience, and Barefoot Charlie always delivered.

As a bootlegger, gambler, and something of a scofflaw, Haase turned encounters with law enforcement into additional publicity opportunities, striving to get his exploits into the newspapers to attract more customers. He operated Barefoot Charlie's Nite Club until his death in 1970. The tavern remained open until a cold winter night in January 1988, when a raging furnace fire consumed Haase's eccentric establishment. The Land O' Lakes Historical Society salvaged Haase's folk art bar fixtures; the stories, postcards, legends, and annual Barefoot Festival will keep Barefoot Charlie alive for years to come.

This event marked the start of the gay rights movement. The year before, June Brehm had opened This Is It, a Milwaukee gay bar, which remained a discrete and largely underground operation until the legislature passed Wisconsin Chapter 112, prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, more than a decade later. As a result, gay bars felt free to operate out in the open.

### *Is the End of Beer Near?*

In 1975, only eight Wisconsin breweries remained in operation. Pabst, Miller, and Schlitz—all in Milwaukee—and G. Heileman in La Crosse ranked among the top ten brewers nationally. Four small-town breweries also survived: Walter in Eau Claire, Leinenkugel in Chippewa Falls, Joseph Huber in Monroe, and the Stevens Point Brewery in Stevens Point. The other nearly 350 Wisconsin breweries that once provided beer for their localities lay abandoned or had vanished. Most of the breweries that survived Prohibition found themselves unable to compete in a national market, where increasing mass-production of beer priced them out of the competition. As Adolph Schumacher, then president of Potosi Brewery, reflected, "We were lucky in that we could keep it going as long as we did. We saw the handwriting in the efficiency of the big breweries. Why pour in more money when the big ones are growing more and more



The five Schumacher cousins, who operated the Potosi Brewery, offer a toast in the waning days of the brewery. WHi Image ID 56597



## EAST

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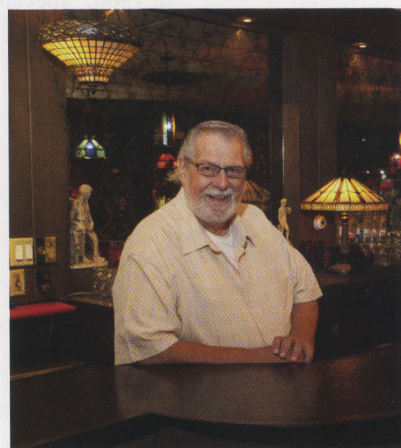
# 54 Milwaukee—This Is It

## 418 East Wells Street



In the late 1960s June Brehm was running a successful supper club in Butler, but she wanted to open a lounge in downtown Milwaukee. Brehm's plan was audacious and perhaps foolhardy because downtown was struggling. Gay bars were far from common, but she knew a lot of gay people and wanted to create a comfortable and safe gathering place during a time when gays suffered great discrimination. Upon stepping inside and touring a tiny bar for sale in an otherwise empty building at the corner of Wells and Jefferson Streets, Brehm proclaimed, "This is it, we aren't going anywhere else."

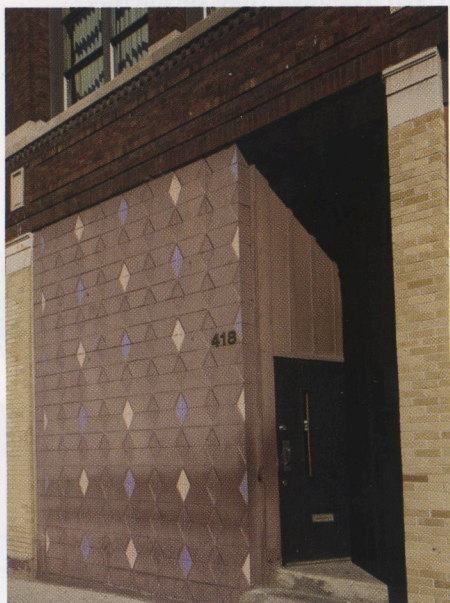
This Is It opened in 1968 and was quickly transformed from a corner tap with high-backed booths into what it closely resembles today. The dim, warm glow of the stained-glass chandelier lamps, which



Joe Brehm still presides at the Milwaukee landmark his mother, June Brehm, opened in 1968.

were commissioned and handcrafted by a local artisan, tame the vintage decor's myriad colors and textures. Also specifically designed for the bar are the tufted, black vinyl half-booths. Arched mirrors spaced throughout help the cozy bar feel more open. Red-carpeted walls soften the classic but diverse tunes emanating from the jukebox and the chatter of customers during busy hours. The bar, with its black top, elbow rail, and plush red facing, runs the length of the tavern, while the back bar sports the usual large mirrors, rows of glasses, and bottles of liquor. The simple back bar stands apart from the average tavern thanks to exceptional seasonal displays of lights and decorations.

This Is It faced competition in the 1970s as new gay-friendly establishments opened, first, upon a wave of gay pride following the Stonewall riots in New York and, later, with the rise in the popularity of dancing to disco music before it went mainstream. But any bar that is successful



The exterior speaks volumes about the secrecy of early gay bars.



Lights and mirrors brighten the windowless tavern.

over a long period of time, whether it caters to gays in a city or lumberjacks in Wisconsin's Northwoods, creates an ambience and setting where people want to see and be seen. June Brehm, with the help of her son and longtime manager, Joe, did just that, establishing a sense of community at the bar, described in an early gay-friendly guide as a "Popular downtown lounge busy with reserved gentlemen and then some not so reserved."<sup>14</sup> Countless gentlemen have shared stories about how June and Joe's acceptance and the inviting atmosphere helped them come out and feel at ease. The bar has long been a staunch supporter of causes and events in the gay community as well.

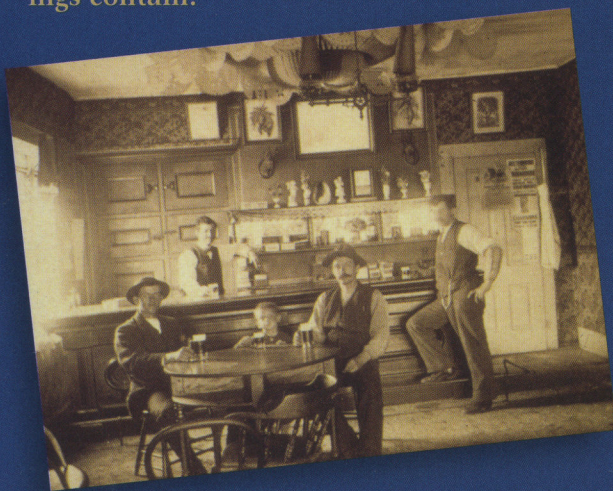
Milwaukee's longest continually operating gay bar, with its vintage interior and retro charm, is being embraced by new and younger customers and that pleases Joe. He suggests it's only fitting that "they're enjoying the bar for what it is, not because we're changing it for them."



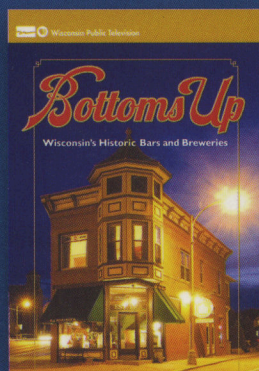
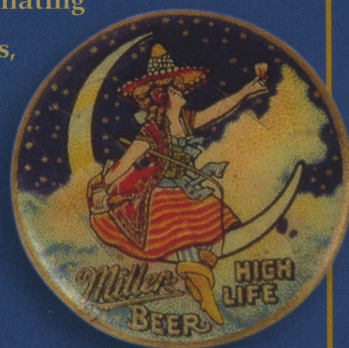
The colorful 1970s interior remains intact.

**W**isconsin is a tavern state. That is a simple statement of fact, but behind it lies a complex and interesting brew of politics, economics, culture, and social mores.

The Wisconsin bar has come in many guises: stagecoach inn, sample room, blind pig, speakeasy, pharmacy, cocktail lounge, theme bar, disco, and brewpub. Each of these forms reflects the character and values of a generation. Come along with Jim Draeger and Mark Speltz on a tour of 70 distinctive bars and breweries around the state as they tap into the stories these buildings contain.



Richly illustrated with 395 contemporary color and historic black-and-white photos, postcards, advertisements, and breweriana, *Bottoms Up* offers a fascinating discussion of the place bars, breweries, and beer hold in the social and cultural history of Wisconsin.



The companion documentary by Wisconsin Public Television features a selection of the bars and breweries highlighted inside.



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