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## Joseph Owades Dies at 86; The Father of Light Beer

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By Adam Bernstein  
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Joseph L. Owades, 86, a biochemist credited with inventing, for better or worse, light beer but whose product lacked the macho marketing that later made Miller Lite a sensation, died of a heart ailment Dec. 16 at his home in Sonoma, Calif.

Initially intrigued by the study of cholesterol, Dr. Owades entered the brewing trade through post-doctoral work in fermentation science. While working in Brooklyn, N.Y., at Rheingold Breweries, then an industry leader, he developed a process to remove the starch from beer. This reduced its carbohydrates and calories.

"When I got into the beer business, I used to ask people why they did not drink beer," Dr. Owades once said. "The answer I got was twofold: One, 'I don't like the way beer tastes.' Two, 'I'm afraid it will make me fat.'"

"It was a common belief then that drinking beer made you fat," he said. "People weren't jogging, and everybody believed beer drinkers got a big, fat beer belly. Period. I couldn't do anything about the taste of beer, but I could do something about the calories."

Introduced in 1967, his product was called Gablinger's Diet Beer. As Dr. Owades later said, the Gablinger's television advertisement showing a man with the girth of a sumo wrestler shoveling spaghetti into his mouth and downing a Gablinger's did little to help the cause.

"Not only did no one want to try the beer," he said, "they couldn't even stand to look at this guy!"

Plus, the name. Brooklyn Brewery President Steve Hindy once told the publication *Modern Brewery Age* that Gablinger's Diet Beer "doesn't exactly roll off the tongue."

Moreover, Hindy said, Dr. Owades "didn't come up with 'tastes great, less filling.' And the beer ended up flopping."

With approval from his boss, Dr. Owades said, he shared his formula with a friend at Chicago's Meister Brau brewery, which soon came out with Meister Brau Lite. He routinely joked, "Being from Chicago, they couldn't spell 'light.'"

Miller Brewing acquired the light beer process when it bought assets of Meister Brau in the early 1970s. The "tastes great, less filling" marketing strategy, which used football players and other tough-knuckled types, helped Miller Lite flourish.

Even if Gablinger's did not find eager takers, Dr. Owades was regarded as the father of light beer. He

became an international consultant in beer, working through his Center for Brewing Studies. He moved to the Bay Area from Boston in the early 1980s.

Although he lived near California's wine-growing region, he was never enthusiastic about aiding the wine business, because beer was simply more intriguing to him.

"The making of wine does not require the skills of a biochemist," he told the San Francisco Chronicle. "The winemaker gets the liquid from which he makes wine prepackaged in little things called grapes. The brewer creates the liquid from which he makes beer."

Joseph Lawrence Owades was born July 9, 1919, in New York to parents from Ukraine. While growing up in the Bronx, he received a chemistry set from his mother, and his interest led him to study the science at City College of New York. He also received a master's and then a doctorate in biochemistry from Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, now Polytechnic University.

He briefly studied fermentation science at Fleischmann's Yeast before beginning a long career at Rheingold, where he rose to vice president and technical director. Soon after his work on Gablinger's, he held executive positions with Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis and Carling O'Keefe in Waltham, Mass.

As a consultant since the mid-1970s, he helped craft formulas for Samuel Adams, New Amsterdam Beer, Pete's Wicked Ale and Foggy Bottom Beer. When the long-defunct Rheingold name was revived in the late 1990s, Dr. Owades was hired to re-create his old recipe.

Some of his work was not terribly successful, including Yen Sum beer, a beverage he made with the herbal root ginseng. A clear malt drink, called Qruze and pronounced "cruise," was marketed at women. Owades said he wanted the aroma to have the allure of pia colada, but one beer scribe noted that it "smells a bit like suntan lotion."

Dr. Owades held many patents and wrote about beer and brewing for technical journals. He held frequent seminars for beer enthusiasts, whether experts or novices, and could be cranky. "In this country, you can call anything an 'ale,' " he once said. He also described the odor of Corona as "skunky."

He was unpretentious as a teacher, refusing to use the periodic table as an educational tool. He preferred scribbling on a board: "The Stuff We Make Beer From."

In 1969, he married Ruth Markowitz, who later sold a gardening catalogue to Williams-Sonoma, and then started the Calyx & Corolla flower catalogue business.

Besides his wife, survivors include two sons and a brother.

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