



The Best in Beers

Since 2013, Craft Brands Co. has been partnering with U.S. brewers to offer exceptional artisanal beers to Ontarians.

The Toronto-based importer credits its successful partnerships in large part to programs offered by the Southern United States Trade Association (SUSTA), including in-person and, more recently, virtual trade missions. “In 2020, we helped facilitate and participated in a virtual trade mission in Ontario,” says Craft Brands co-owner and managing director Chris Goddard. “Ontario can be a difficult market to break into and it certainly takes time – usually around a year to get a seasonal listing to start – and patience.”

The grocery channel in particular can be challenging. “Many grocers in the province work off of a planogram, and because of the seasonal nature of the alcohol listings, it can be difficult to have the timing work out,” he explains. In addition, forecasting is complicated by the fact that warehousing and distribution are handled by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO).

The company has had success bringing in two supplier-partners to Ontario as a result of Goddard’s last in-person visit to the U.S. The first is Flying Dog Brewing and its Gonzo Imperial Porter. “We had a great launch for the winter season in fall 2020 and hopefully will have it back in market again for fall 2021, as well as a new seasonal listing, Double Dog Double IPA for winter 2021.” Also on tap is Heavy Seas’ TropiCannon, which Craft Brands will launch this summer at the LCBO, “and will hopefully be able to get some grocery listings for it as well.”

Meanwhile, he continues to forge connections virtually. “We did get a chance to connect through a virtual speed-



Chris Goddard

dating and sampling event,” says Goddard. “Our agency helped to get the samples into Ontario with the SUSTA team and then get the samples out to the various agencies participating. It was actually quite fun!”

As consumers increasingly opt for healthier choices, Goddard says there is a trend now to low-alcohol and low-calorie beers – “beers that would fit into an active lifestyle or a ‘better-for-you’ category,” he says. “There is always excitement around award-winning beers, so some of the OG and classic U.S. craft beers do very well in market. Our trends follow the U.S. craft trends quite closely.” Goddard also cites sour beers, which the LCBO describes as “one of the hottest beer styles in the world, appealing to both connoisseurs and casual beer lovers looking for something a little different.”

And something a little different is what Goddard finds by participating in the SUSTA programs. “Working with SUSTA has been very educational,” he says. “We have met some great suppliers and discovered some truly amazing brands.”