



Feature

Meet the YouTube-Taught Brewers of Moldova

February 21, 2019

A biting wind scatters flurries of snow around a dreary industrial park. Ice clings to the metal staircase leading up to Tenemu Beer's brewing facility in Chişinău, Moldova. It's the kind of a day when a beer-lover's thoughts turn to spiced ales and roasty stouts, but until very recently, the choices here were lager, lager, and more lager.

"When we went to the neighborhood store to buy beer, it was always the same. We thought, 'Why not try to make our own, something we like better?'" Andrei Iordan explains as he shows a visitor around Tenemu's drafty, bare-bones brewery, while one of his partners is perched on a ladder over a large vat, stirring the steamy mash for a new batch of beer with a long metal pole.

When Iordan and two friends launched Tenemu in May 2018, they joined a nascent craft-beer scene in Moldova, a small Eastern European country and former Soviet republic that's been wine-producing territory for thousands of years—it supplied more than half of the wine drunk in the USSR. Beer production, though, was limited to industrial lagers. The first few imported brews didn't arrive until the early 2010s and Moldova's first commercial craft brewery, [Litra](#), started production in 2015.

"I was 35 years old when I tasted my first IPA and learned that all beer wasn't just yellow fizz, that it could actually taste good," says Dorin Nicolaescu-Musteață, a self-proclaimed beer geek from Chişinău who [reviews](#) Moldovan and international beers online in both Romanian (the local language) and English.



By Jennifer Hattam

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Taproom 27

With equally limited exposure to craft beer, the founders of Tenemu gave themselves a crash-course in brewing by scouring the internet, reading books, and watching YouTube videos. It wasn't an overnight success. "One of our early batches was so bad, we had to throw it all out. That was a very tough moment," Jordan says.

Jordan and his partners, Anatolie Serdesniuk and Artiom Jordan, are now producing and selling 3,000 to 4,000 liters of beer a month. They deliver the kegs in the trunks of their own small cars to beer shops, which fill up takeaway bottles for customers straight from the tap, as well as to a new crop of craft-beer-focused pubs like [Taproom 27](#) in downtown Chişinău. A hub for local beer-lovers, Taproom 27 has the rustic-industrial look that you often find in American brewpubs, complete with a menu board chalked with the beers on tap and sayings in English like "Beer makes me hoppy."

Taproom 27 and its sister restaurant and bar Smokehouse have American founders, as does Chişinău brewery [Labrewtory](#). The influence of American craft beer is strong in Moldova. Tenemu's first beer was an American pale ale. Currently in rotation are an American-style quince pale ale with light bitter and fruity notes, a crisp IPA, an imperial stout brewed with coffee beans and cacao, a golden ale called Puff, and a smooth cream ale brewed with corn flakes.

"Since there's no old brewing tradition in Moldova, like you have in many European countries, the beer that's being made here is in more of a global style," says Kirill Zmurciuk, an early member of Chişinău's homebrewing community and the beer-maker behind the nomadic brewery Sunstone Alehouse.

The Tenemu team sees a plus side to that lack of a strong beer culture, however. "You're not handcuffed by tradition, so you can brew what you want, with no restrictions. We think it's an advantage," Andrei says. "There's a lot of flavors here in our own region that we want to try and incorporate in our brewing." One is cimbru (summer savory), a herb typically used to season the popular grilled-meatball dish mititei and the traditional chicken soup zeamă — the latter coincidentally reputed to be a hangover cure.



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Eastern Europe is seen as a growth market for craft beer, but up-and-coming Moldovan brewers like Tenemu face many challenges in building their businesses. With no domestic hops or malt production, these key ingredients have to be imported from Europe or Russia. Tenemu tries to team up with other local brewers to place bulk orders so they can keep costs down. The domestic market, especially for luxuries like craft beer, is small. Moldova's 3.5 million people earn an average monthly salary of less than \$400 USD, making the country the poorest in Europe. Many young people migrate away for better opportunities; remittances from workers abroad account for a quarter of Moldova's total GDP. (Part of Tenemu's start-up capital came from Iordan's years working in construction in France, the produce business in Ukraine, and at a bar and restaurant in Spain.)

"The Moldovan market had a lot of potential when I started out homebrewing in the early 2010s, but then we had this one billion dollar bank heist and everyone's purchasing power has really diminished," says Zmurciuk, referring to a massive money laundering scandal that saw one billion USD disappear from three major Moldovan banks between 2012 and 2014, throwing the country into crisis.

"The beer industry is still in a bind. A couple more breweries plan to open this year, but then the market will be saturated," Zmurciuk says. Such concerns as well as struggles with permitting bureaucracy, which he admits have eased over the past few years, led him to become a nomadic brewer, partnering with breweries in other countries, particularly neighboring Romania, rather than setting up his own facility in Moldova.

Though many Moldovan craft breweries, including Tenemu, are turning their sights to exports, that presents another uphill battle. The prices of beer is too low in Ukraine, Moldova's neighbor to the north, to make exporting worthwhile, Iordan explains, while the quality and quantity of craft beer are higher in Romania, which benefits from easier and cheaper access to European ingredients and markets.

"We know we have a lot to learn and that we have to make something really good to sell elsewhere in Europe, where there's so much competition," Iordan says.

The young brewers remain optimistic. They're working on plans to move Tenemu into a larger facility with a taproom to host visitors. There, they will also be able to bottle beer for export, buy additional fermenters, and maybe even get a machine to do the mashing. For now, Iordan laughs, it's a good workout.

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