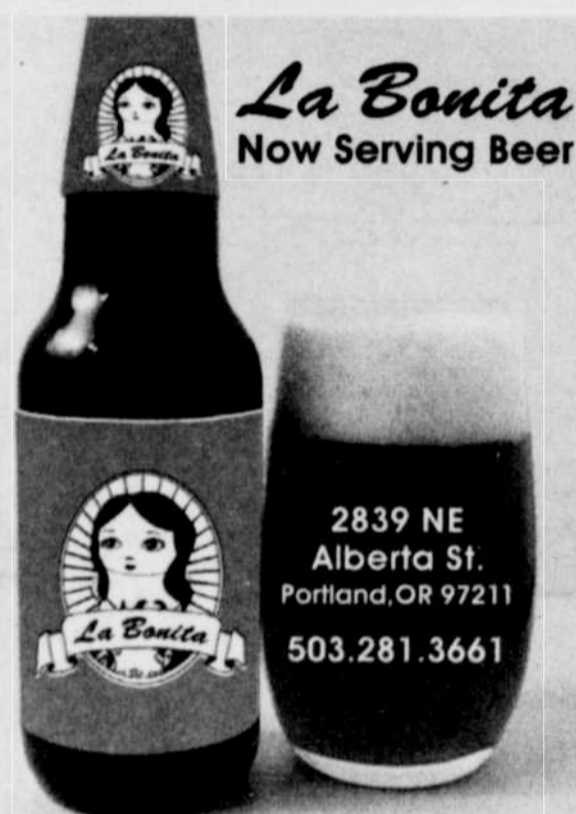


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To Leather, With Love

Oregon Leather Pride 2011 is back in black

COVERAGE BY RYAN J. PRADO

As visibility and understanding increases toward the world of leather enthusiasts here in Oregon, so grows the booted footprint of the subculture. The leather community has come a long way, having distanced itself from the biker aesthetic, the brawny bear milieu and the misconceptions stemming from a never-ending onslaught of largely negative pop culture references.

Even 2010's Portland Pride Parade debacle, wherein a sex sling display threatened to alienate the community at large, has done little to discourage the leather loyal. Leather pride is alive and well, its faithful welcoming anyone interested to learn more during the 2011 Oregon Leather Pride week, taking place August 5-14 all over Portland.

Building upon 2010's banner Leather Pride program, OLP co-chair Ben Brown Jr. aimed to further the outreach of the events slated for this year's lineup. With a now 16 group-strong showing, OLP 2011 actually packs in more events in one less day than last year—27 in all, a feat made even more mind-boggling considering that OLP didn't receive the grants it sought to help fund this year's festivities. What's more, the majority of the leather-clad soirées run under \$10 for admission, and half of the events are free.

"A lot of it had to do with building on successes and showing other groups that we could actually pull this off once again, and do it in a way that we've never done before," Brown Jr. explains. "We didn't get the grant funding we were hoping to this year, but rather than be bitter about it, we decided to make lemonade."

Instead, OLP received a small grant from Pride NW, which organizers utilized to manufacture official OLP 2011 T-shirts. Sales from these shirts—competitively priced at \$15 a piece or two for \$25—go directly to cover the core expenses for this year's smorgasbord of events.

Of OLP's DIY approach, Brown Jr. adds, "Even if the funds are dry, there's no reason not to move forward with your goals, and do it in a very positive way."

Oregon Leather Pride began as a weekend-long event in June of 1989, held during the 20-year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots and the 12th Portland Pride Festival. The festivities gained momentum in 1991, evolving into an entire week's worth of leather shenanigans, and soon taking on more leather, BDSM and kink groups to carry the weight.

In 2003, several of the Portland area's most involved leather and leather-friendly groups—including the Portland Leather Alliance, Blackout Leather Productions, the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court and Bad Girls—met to discuss creating a more unified Leather Pride Week. The result was the Oregon Leather Pride committee, which has grown every year since its inception.

Among the more familiar events at OLP: the popular Leather Family BBQ, taking place this year Thursday, August 11 from 6 p.m. to dusk at Overlook Park; the 15th Annual Mr. and Mrs. Oregon State Leather contest on August 13; and the Rose & Thorn Awards Sunday, August 14.

OLP 2011 also welcomes a few new kids to the block. First, on Tuesday, August 9, Brown Jr. facilitates an online media campaign geared

Museum in Chicago, Ill.

"The Leather History Exhibit, of all the new events, is the one I'm most excited about," Brown Jr. enthuses. "We've never attempted anything on this scale during Leather Pride. It's still going to be small with the hope that over the next several years we can really grow it out. It gives people the opportunity to see what we're really about and see how long and rich our history is—not just as leathermen, but in the broader queer community."

Other established events during OLP 2011 include the Portland Leather Alliance's Leather Tastings event at The Conservatory on Saturday, August 6 (noon-4 p.m.); the Leather & Lace Show on Wednesday, August 10 at Embers Avenue (7 p.m.), hosted by the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court; and the Portland Leather Men Potluck on Saturday, August 13. Held from 4 to 6 p.m., it is the Rose City's oldest men's-only leather group meeting.

In another new addition, Blackout Leather Productions is instituting an Oregon State Bootblack title, given to those whose bootblacking prowess reigns supreme. The winner of the contest has the option to compete for International Mr. or Ms. Bootblack in Chicago come May of next year.

"It's a nice addition because it recognizes a whole segment of the community that is dedicated to service, which is one of our founding principles of the leather community, and leather pride is service to your community," says Brown Jr.

Through an even more diversified parade of leather-loving happenings, the OLP 2011 committee hopes above all else for people to keep an open mind, and to explore the scope of events whether you're new to the scene or not. And for those uncertain of where to begin, Brown Jr. has another suggestion.

"Contact one of us and let us have a discussion about where your comfort level is at," he pleads. "A big public event in a park may not be your thing, but something small and intimate with people that you have an interest in might be. It's about where people's comfort level is and, most importantly, deciding for themselves where their comfort level is as an entry level.

"We're incredibly welcoming and an incredibly friendly group of people. More than anything, throw caution to the wind and have a great, great time."



Brian Johnson marching with this year's Pride Parade contingent

toward reducing men's syphilis rates. The effort is in reaction to recent data suggesting a rise in STD rates among men who have sex with men.

"We're starting to trend to some very scary data," Brown Jr. says. "The last thing we need to do is replicate what's been happening in San Francisco, New York and Seattle. It's become an incredibly serious problem. This is something that's from the men's community, for the men's community, just to look out for each other."

From 5 to 7 p.m. August 11, the first Leather History Exhibit hits The Conservatory (5224 SE Foster Road) to showcase a collaboration between Andy Mangels—Mr. Oregon State Leather 2004—and his Oregon Leather History Project, the Portland Leather Alliance and OLP 2011 co-chair Chelsea Watson, who has been instrumental in bringing archives from the Leather Archives and