

In October 1997, Boffin Brothers Brewery announced that it had sold a minority share of the company to Japanese brewer, Kirin Holdings Company. Kirin, which is the largest owner of breweries in Australia, would get less than half of Boffin Brothers and representation on the company's board. Boffin Brothers would get an undisclosed amount of cash and access to Kirin's nationwide network of distributors—universally agreed to be the best in the business. There is no doubt that, aside from the choice of their first commercially-released beer in 1985, this was the most consequential decision the owners of Boffin Brothers, Dave and Rafe Boffin, ever made.

This decision transformed the business by allowing it to grow from a regional, all-draught brewery to a widely-distributed brand of bottled beer. In a stroke, Boffin Brothers had access to markets that would allow it to become one of the largest breweries in Australia. However, as craft brewing matured and grew as a movement in the 2000s, it was as if Boffin Brothers had an asterisk affixed to its name. Every new release, company initiative, and rebrand seemed to be evaluated with a proviso attached to it: 'partly-owned by Kirin'. In a world in which 'small' and 'independent' became watchwords for quality, craft breweries associated with large, multinational breweries were marked by a certain stigma.

Now, more than three decades after the partnership, many have rendered their judgment. The trade organization for small breweries, of which Boffin Brothers had been a charter member, excommunicated them following deliberations that spanned 2006–2007. Outside the brewery, the verdict was ambiguous because, sure, the partnership allowed the brewery to grow, but many felt Dave and Rafe should never have gone into business with Kirin. Within the brewery, however, there was never much doubt. It was considered a stroke of luck that Kirin was a willing partner and there has been little reconsideration of the deal. In retrospect, reasonable people may disagree about the wisdom of the decision; but it is easy enough to see why the company formed this partnership.

Commented [VF1]: Could perhaps be replaced with 'With the stroke of a pen' for clarity?

Commented [VF2]: What did the partnership do? Perhaps 'began'?

Commented [VF3]: The tone of this sentence is different to the rest of the piece. Using 'while' here instead of 'sure', would maintain the tone throughout the article. Comments?

Commented [VF4]: If 'while' replaces 'sure', 'but' becomes redundant

Commented [VF5]: This seems to imply there was 'some' doubt. Was there some doubt or was there 'no doubt'? Possibly substitute the word 'any'.

One of the biggest problems that lead to Dave²⁸ and Rafe's decision to sell a minority share of their company to Kirin²⁹ was that³⁰ as early as 1993, Boffin Brother²⁸' thirty-barrel brewery at Russell Street was already approaching maximum production. Consequently, Dave and Rafe were mulling the idea of expansion. A number of factors shaped their thinking³¹; Perhaps-perhaps foremost among them was a growing sense of confidence and ambition. It was, as always, refracted through the owners' self-deprecating personalities³² but it was there. Rafe came the closest to voicing their aims baldly when he said, 'Part of it was that we felt that³³ if anyone³⁴'s going to take this style of beer national, it should be us³⁵'.

Dave's wife Ann spoke even more openly of the brothers' ambitions. She said, "Dave and Rafe are reserved, but they're powerful and very steadfast in their beliefs"³⁶. Anne also identified Dave and Rafe's long-standing objectives for the company, including³⁷ a positive company culture, a great product, and lots of people drinking its hand-crafted beers.

Few breweries were more successful at this point in Australian craft brewing, and Boffin Brothers² success had spawned many imitators. The national landscape was still forming; only a few brands had managed to obtain national distribution. Given the buzz surrounding it²'s early beers, there was reason to believe Boffin Brothers could join that select group.

There was also a structural problem that informed Dave and Rafe's decision to sell. Because they were still a draught-only brewery, Boffin Brothers could not compete in the segment where most of the beer was sold³⁸ at the supermarket. Already maxed out, Boffin Brothers could not make enough beer to both meet its draught orders and expand into bottles.

Commented [VF6]: What is 'maxed out'? Would adding 'in production' provide more clarity?