



Smart Hops

Diego Benitez had a unique graduate-school experience at Caltech. By day, he studied the ins and outs of olefin metathesis in the laboratory of Victor and Elizabeth Atkins Professor of Chemistry Robert Grubbs—work that resulted in a PhD in chemistry in 2005, as well as a trip to Sweden that same year when Grubbs was awarded the Nobel Prize. However, when Benitez wasn't studying reactions in the lab, he was enthusiastically pursuing another interest: craft beer.

“Pasadena is a good destination for craft beer, so in addition to chemistry, I guess you could say that I also had the chance to study beer while I was at Caltech,” Benitez says. The tasty

after-hours research eventually led to home brewing, a hobby he continued to pursue through his postdoc in nanotechnology at UCLA and a few years working in industry.

In 2012 Benitez and fellow chemist and beer enthusiast Kevin Ogilby decided to take the plunge and quit their day jobs to pursue their hobby full time—that's how Progress Brewing was born. The brewery, located in South El Monte—about 10 miles southeast of Caltech—specializes in what Benitez calls “drinkable beers that the majority of people will like—not just beer geeks.”

Although the applied chemistry of crafting a new brew strays from his formal laboratory training, it has allowed Benitez to accomplish another life goal: entrepreneurship. “I come from a family of entrepreneurs, so I always knew I kind of wanted to branch out on my own. Beer seemed like a really fun way to do that,” he says. —JSC