

CRITTERS

# Shiner Beer Says Its Bock Is the GOAT. So Why Does Its New Ad (and Iconic Logo) Feature a Sheep?

To solve this malty mystery, we spoke to a German linguist and took a deep dive into beer history.



By Sasha von Oldershausen

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I was driving north on Interstate 35 through Austin one recent afternoon when I passed a billboard for Shiner Bock, the popular beer brewed here in our home state. “The Original Texas G.O.A.T,” the sign read, alongside the familiar logo found on every can or bottle of Bock—a ruminant with large, curling horns. The moment I saw the sign, I clocked that something was amiss. “That’s no goat,” I thought. “That’s a sheep.”

Specifically, a bighorn sheep. I knew this because for months, I’d been working on a story about the desert bighorn, and by then I had memorized its anatomical features—most notably its namesake bulky, coiled horns (which remind me of Diva Plavalaguna’s cranium in the nineties sci-fi flick *The Fifth Element*). The celebrated sheep, which is native to West Texas, was wiped out from the state by the 1960s, largely due to overhunting and disease brought by domestic sheep. But thanks to conservation efforts, in part spearheaded by Texas Parks and Wildlife, the animal has found a renewed home in West Texas’s high-desert landscape.

Still one to doubt my better instincts, I double-checked with Froylán Hernández, the desert bighorn sheep program leader for TPWD, just to be sure I wasn’t missing something about the Shiner Bock label. “That’s a sheep,” he told me. “I’ve gotten several calls from El Paso about that.” (Evidently, there’s a GOAT billboard there too.)

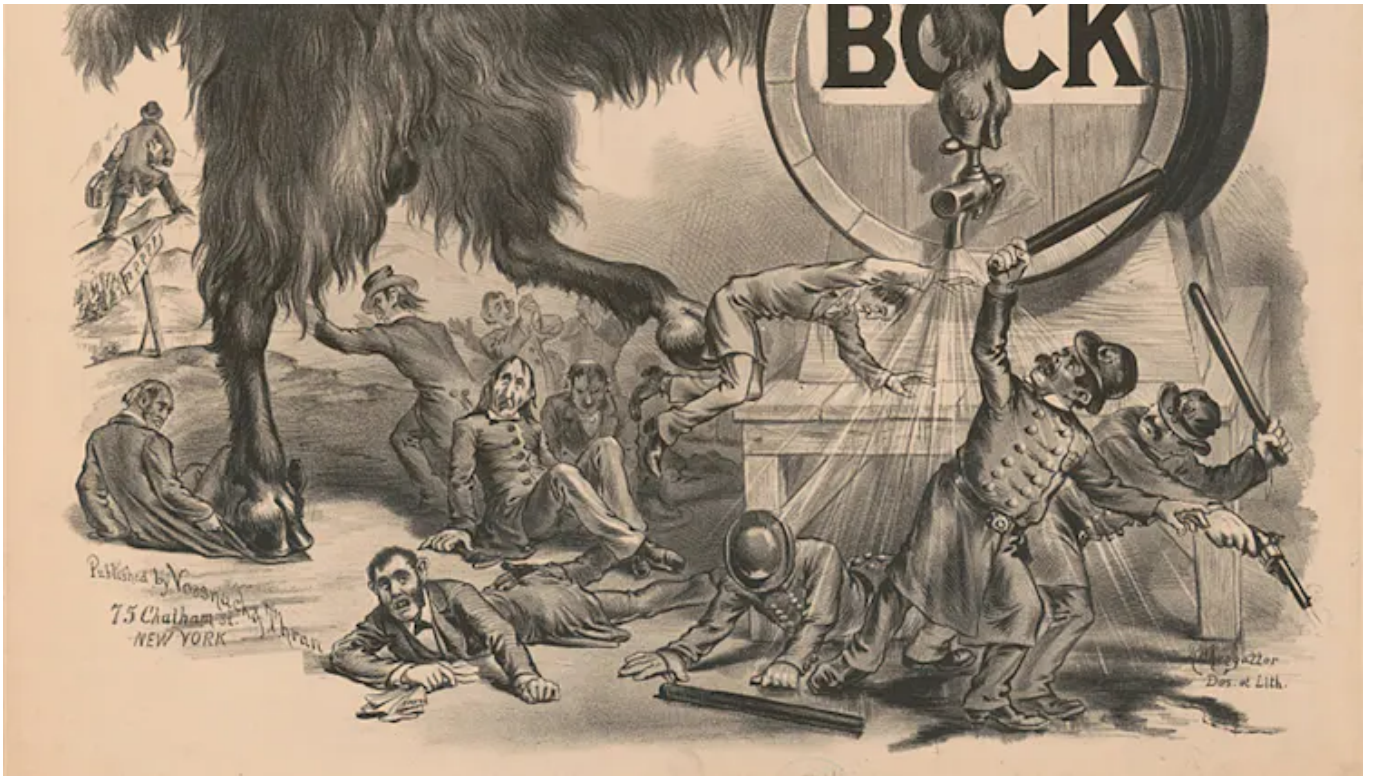
I investigated further. On Shiner Beer’s X page, an ad poses the question: “Why is there a ram on Shiner Bock labels?” A man standing beside a sheep answers the question simply: “‘Bock’ is a German word for goat.”

Hans Boas, a professor of German linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, confirmed that “Bock” is indeed a German word for a male goat. The term is short for “Ziegenbock.” Within the context of beer, “bock” traces its etymological origins to Einbeck, Germany, where the unusually dark and strong brew—between 6.5 and 8.5 percent alcohol by volume—was created, in the fourteenth century. At a time when clean water was hard to come by and refrigeration was nonexistent, bock quickly became popular, Boas said, because it would last a long time, owing to its high alcohol content. “Back in

those times, beer would typically only have two or three or four percent alcohol, because there was, in most towns, no clean water,” Boas said. “So a lot of people literally drank the regular thin beer just to get their liquid intake.” As the beer made its way to southern Germany, where many speakers pronounced vowels and consonants differently, “Einbeck” started to sound a lot more like “*ein Bock*,” meaning “a male goat.”

Over time, goat imagery came to be associated with the beer. Going back more than a century, you’ll find dozens of advertisements for bock beers with goats in them. An **ad from 1875** depicts the animal on its hind legs as it leans against a beer keg and opens the tap to spray balking law enforcement officers with bock, all the while holding a frothy stein in its front hoof. In the case of this ad, the animal in question demonstrates all the telltale signs of an actual goat: Its chin is bearded. Its horns are shorter, straighter, and point upward; so, too, does its tail. Compare these features to those of the native sheep—beardless, with horns that are much girthier and more curved and a tail that hangs down.

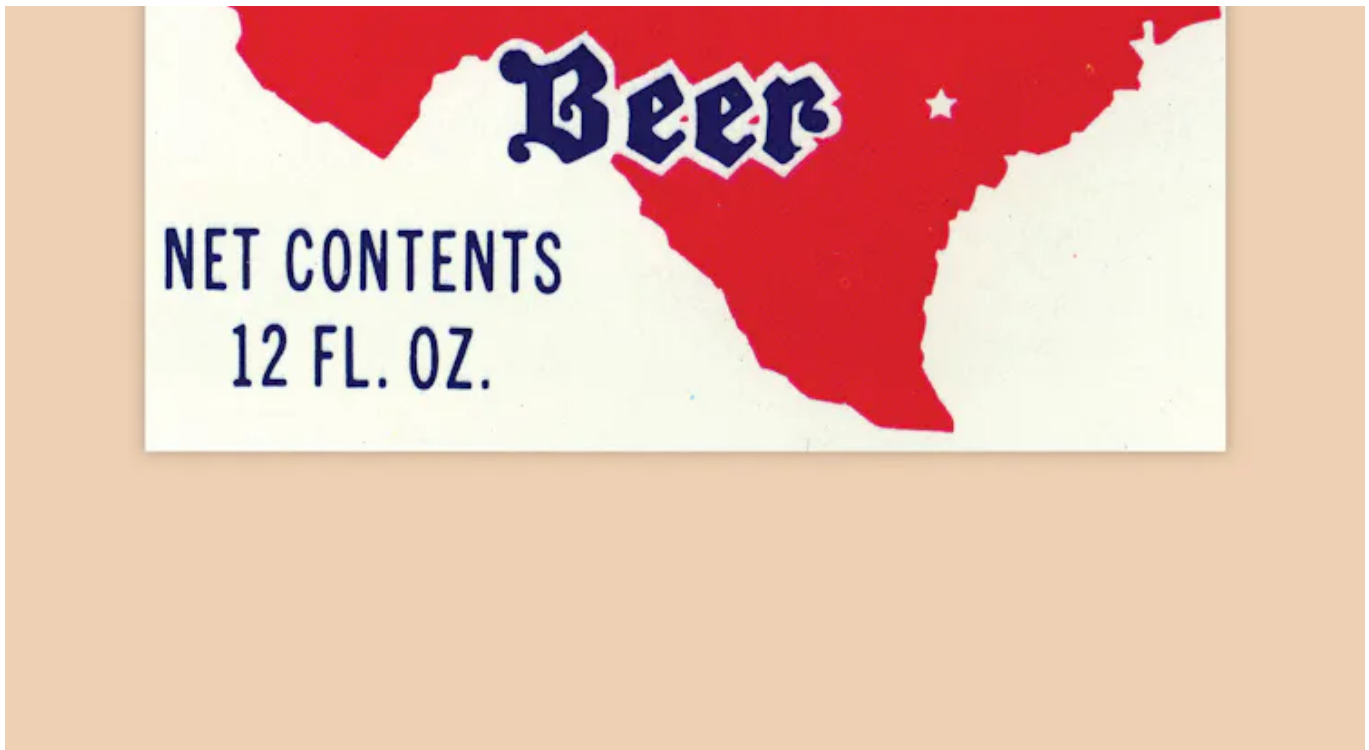




An 1875 advertisement for bock beer featuring a goat.

Popular and applied graphic art print filing series/Library of Congress





**A vintage Shiner Bock label.**  
**Courtesy of Shiner Beer**

And, in fact, some of the earliest versions of the Shiner Bock label did feature a goat. A label from the fifties and sixties depicts a red silhouette of Texas with a bearded billy goat in the corner. The shift to the classic yellow label and ram happened around the seventies, said Nick Weiland, Shiner Beer’s brand director. I wondered if maybe Shiner could’ve changed the label not long after the bighorn was extirpated from Texas, as an homage to the majestic animal. “It’s possible,” said Weiland, though he couldn’t say for sure. Maybe I was forcing my own Texas spin on it, though Weiland contends that since the brand’s inception, in 1909, Shiner has become “less German and more Texan.”

Of the recent ad campaign, Weiland maintains, “We weren’t trying to suggest that our mascot was actually a goat,” though it’s perhaps understandable that the play on words would lead to some confusion.