

BEERS OF THE TIMES

A Delicious Free-for-All

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Photo: Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Tasting Report: Belgian in Attitude, if Not in Origin

A GOOD selection of Belgian-style ales is like the very best kind of buffet, offering an assortment of flavors, aromas, styles, strengths and types. You want strong ale, sour ale, sweet ale, dry ale, golden, dark, wheat, fruity and malty. When we set out to draw a stylistic standard for a planned tasting of Belgian golden ales, it seemed as if we'd taken on an impossible task. But glory does not come to those who quit easily.

So we forged ahead. We gathered Belgian golden ales and their foreign relatives as if they were snowflakes, aware that each was so unusual, and often so beautiful in a singular way, that it would resist any but the roughest categorization.

The blind tasting of these 20 Belgian-style ales was truly glorious, beer at its highest level. For the tasting Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Christian Pappanicholas, the owner of Resto, a Belgian restaurant in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan, and Richard Scholz, an owner of Bierkraft in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Our efforts to categorize the beers withered in the face of diversity. Ostensibly, we sought strong golden ales, which at least suggests beers with a lot of alcohol and of a certain color, right? Well, not exactly. Of the 20 we ended up with, most were golden, but some tended toward amber and brown. And while some of the beers were strong, with alcohol levels of 9 to 13 percent, a handful were in the 6 percent range, about the strength of a typical pilsner.

But most were so good that we lost interest in whether they conformed to our parameters. We had beers that tasted of spices, like coriander and cloves, and those that tasted like fruit. Some were aged in oak barrels. One beer resembled the most exotic sort of lambic, a type of beer that is brewed using wild yeasts rather than those

selected by brewers to produce predictable results. It had a sour funkiness that is a taste well worth acquiring. Another was so bitterly hoppy and dry that the beer seemed to have the texture of cotton, which was actually not unpleasant.

"The diversity is what makes them amazing," Richard said. "Belgians go out of their way to make unique beers, different from the guy two blocks away."

One thing that brings together what the beer writer Randy Mosher has called "all this joyful chaos" is the use of highly distinctive yeasts. While the choice of yeast is important for any brewer, it is crucial for the producers of Belgian beers, who look to yeasts for many of the idiosyncratic flavors in their brews.

"The yeast is what's different," Richard added. "It's the underlying flavor component."

The diversity of these beers also makes their appeal very personal. I mentioned a beer that reminded me of a lambic — that was the No. 4 beer of our top 10, the Good Harbor Golden Ale from Leelanau, brewed in Dexter, Mich. We loved this beer, but it has an unusual flavor that some may find off-putting at first. I recommend sticking with it, though, because once you begin to like these sorts of beers you can't help but seek them out.

Of the 20 beers we tasted, 10 were from Belgium, nine from the United States and one from Canada. It says something about the skill and ambition of American brewers that three of our top four were from the United States.

Our No. 1 beer was the Oro de Calabaza from Jolly Pumpkin, which, like the Good Harbor Ale, is from Dexter, Mich., a small town near Ann Arbor. A cabal of Belgian beer lovers in Dexter?

Perhaps, but these two beers were brewed by the same man, Ron Jeffries, the founder of Jolly Pumpkin, who also finds time to do the brewing for Leelanau. Both of these beers were unfiltered, giving them a hazy appearance, and aged in barrels, but beyond that they are completely different. While the Good Harbor was funky, the Oro de Calabaza was spicy, fruity and floral, with soft carbonation and fresh, vibrant flavors. Same man, different yeasts, at the least.

Our No. 2 beer was the Valeir Divers from Contreras, a small brewery in the East Flanders region of Belgium. Once again, a totally different beer, with an aroma that reminded me of fresh corn, and complex flavors. The beer also had a touch of sweetness, but it was so well balanced that it seemed to be dry.

Another Contreras beer, the Valeir Extra, also made our top 10, coming in at No. 7. The Extra seemed less complex than the Divers, with more bitterness from hops. The Web site of the Contreras importer, [12 Percent](#), categorizes the Extra as a Belgian India pale ale, and the Divers as a Tripel, a style of golden beer modeled on Trappist beers. We're simply going to call them Belgian golden ales.

The tasting panel's top American beer not from Dexter, Mich., was AleSmith's Horny Devil, from San Diego, a bright, spicy, beautifully balanced brew that wears its 11 percent alcohol very lightly. We also very much liked the Canadian entry, the Unibroue Maudite, which had a balance of spicy and fruity flavors that we found refreshing.

One surprise in our tasting was that Duvel, the classic example of a strong golden ale, did not make our top 10. This especially surprised me as I loved its spicy, flowery flavors, which lingered in the mouth, but my colleagues felt the example we tasted was not as fresh as it ought to be, so they voted it out.

Freshness is always an issue when dealing with imported beers, which have to travel a long way in not-always-ideal conditions. This was not a problem, naturally, with Local 1 from Brooklyn Brewery, which was spicy and tart, punctuated with a refreshing bitterness.

While hoppy bitterness is not often considered a trademark of Belgian brewers, our No. 10 beer, the XX Bitter from De Ranke, was replete with it. It was perhaps the hoppiest Belgian beer I have ever tasted, and the driest, a strange but compelling combination that we indeed liked.

Among the many unusual qualities of these beers is the pricing. They are not cheap. The Het Anker Lucifer, from Belgium, for example, cost \$6 for an 11.2-ounce bottle.

Our No. 1, Jolly Pumpkin, cost \$18 for a cork-topped 750-milliliter bottle. Yes, it's a lot more than a six-pack of Pabst. But these are not industrial beers. They are hand-brewed by artisans. I think you'll taste the difference, in all their confounding glory.

Leelanau Good Harbor Golden Ale Dexter, Mich. ***

\$20, 750 ml.

Tart, sour and beautifully funky with wild, vibrant citrus flavors and subtle sweetness.



Photo: Tony Cenicola/The New York Times