

BEER BUZZ:

BULL IN A CHINA SHOP: THE BELGO-AMERICAN STYLE

by Joey Williams



I've touched on the blending of brewing traditions present in the craft beer landscape of present day. The original influences were German and English brewing, along with the use of local ingredients. Then came the ever-changing and always evolving "American-style" of brewing that began to blend itself with the other brewing nations.

What I haven't covered, in the detail that is justified, is the recent combination of American and Belgian brewing styles. The big, burly American-style beers with their over-the-top flavors and extreme nature shouldn't blend well with the deft hand and calculated flavoring that characterizes Belgian beers, but they do. The utilization of an heirloom Belgian yeast strain or old-world technique in an American style of beer is enough to set your taste buds dancing and is certainly a concoction worth seeking out.

American craft brewers have no boundaries or conventions that would limit their creativity. And, unlike England or Germany, Belgium is a brewing landscape of unclassifiable beers produced by centuries old processes with no adherence to any laws or traditions. It was only a matter of time before these two like-minded groups began to draw from one another to further their respective creations. American brewers are known for big, bold flavors and assertive hop character likely to turn your face inside out at times. Belgian brewers play the finesse game, surprising the drinker with a hint of this or a touch of that intermingled with just the right amount of everything else. The two have very little in common on the surface. It's those differences, being nearly polar opposites, that have made the combination so magical.

Allagash Brewing of Portland, Maine is a brewery I've spoken at length about. The brewery's flagship beer, Allagash White, is a perfect example of Belgian traditions combining with American brewing philosophies. White is a traditional witbier, brewed with large portions of wheat and spiced with coriander and bitter orange peel. The American influence comes from more assertive spice additions and a healthier dose of hops. There is still plenty of finesse and the classic witbier thirst quenching character, but there's also a lot more going on than just refreshment. Allagash has had a winning beer on their hands since day one with White and drinkers and competition judges have showed their approval time and time again, including a Gold medal at the 2010 World Beer Cup for the White Ale style just a few weeks ago.



The Belgians are keeping things as a "give and take" when it comes to brewing innovation. Duvel-Moortgat, the brewery best known for beers like Duvel and Maredsous, brewed a stronger version of their highly acclaimed Duvel Golden Ale with a much larger addition of hops, dubbed Duvel Tripel Hop. The beer was well received, but expensive to brew and thus to purchase, so the brewery only made a limited amount before retiring the beer. Even with the limited amount, Duvel Tripel Hop had an impact and is said to be the inspiration for Stone Brewing's Vertical Epic 08.08.08, a Belgian IPA brewed to commemorate that date. The 08.08.08 combined the citrus and tropical fruit flavors found in Stone IPA with a spicy, fruity Belgian yeast to create one of the first beers in a growing style. '08 Vertical Epic was such a huge hit that Stone made the decision to bring it back in 2009 as Cali-Belgique as a semi-regular release. Cali-Belgique is due for another release soon and word from the brewery is that Texas will finally see some.

While we impatiently await the arrival of Stone's Belgian IPA, we can enjoy another hop bomb dressed up in Belgian yeast with Green Flash's Le Freak. Green Flash knows how to utilize the hop to its fullest and showcases their mastery of coaxing the most out of a yeast strain in the depth of flavor and character in Le Freak. Imagine the lightly honeyed fruit of a quality Tripel and the floral, citrusy, fruity hop impact of a well executed IPA and then add the magic that seems to be created when the two meet and you might have an idea of what sort of enjoyment you're in for.



The hop influence doesn't always have to be the intense assault that characterizes a modern IPA. Boulevard Brewing of Kansas City, Missouri created a perfectly dry, quenching farmhouse ale like you'd find on a family farm in Belgium and added just the right amount of American Amarillo hops for aroma and flavor to separate it from the pack. Tank 7 is an 8% ABV symphony of malt, hops and yeast. I fell in love with this beer the first time I had it. The combination of traditional grassy, herbal hops with the extremely citrusy, almost tangerine-like Amarillos brought together by the fruit character of the brewery's house Belgian yeast, all suspended in a dry cracker-like malt body make for some of the best Summer drinking I can think of. If it weren't 8%, and if I had a yard, I would probably drink Tank 7 after mowing the lawn. It's that blend of strong flavors and finesse that make these beers so amazing.

The Belgo-American brewing style, as it is being called, is one that is entirely new and undefined which makes it an exciting venture for brewers from both sides of the Atlantic. It took the Belgians to tame a bit of the American extremes that the Germans and English couldn't. And, it took the Americans to push the Belgians to new heights in a world where they were most creative. This match is a long time coming and one that will continue to give birth to some of the world's finest beers. ☺



Got beer myths or other questions you'd like some insight on?

E-mail me: jwilliams@specsonline.com

NEW ON SHELVES AT SPEC'S DOWNTOWN:

Stone Imperial Russian Stout '10 22oz
Stone Sublimely Self-Righteous Black IPA 22oz
Great Divide Chocolate Oak-Aged Yeti 22oz
Green Flash Barleywine '10 22oz
Green Flash Imperial IPA 22oz
Independence Jasperilla Old Ale 22oz
Independence Stash IPA 4pk
Independence Convict Hill Oatmeal Stout 4pk
Dogfish Head Immort Ale 4pk
Oskar Blues Gubna Imperial IPA 4pk cans
Widmer Deadlift Imperial IPA 4pk
Lagunitas Undercover Investigation Shutdown Ale 6pk
Samuel Adams Summer Ale 6pk & 12pk

