

BEER BUZZ:

THE BOOTLEGGER'S SPIRIT

by Joey Williams



It's starting to get to that point in Houston where the thought of drinking anything over 6% and darker than amber while outdoors just doesn't sound appealing. Nothing against grabbing an Imperial Stout and turning the AC down in the house, but it's not exactly something you want to do while outside with a group of friends one afternoon. No, Texas summers (all 6 months of them) lend themselves more to blondes, pilsners, hefeweizens and other beers known for their thirst quenching abilities. My "go to" style for the warmer months has been Belgian Wit (white) for the last few years and it's looking like this time around will be no different. The tangy flavors of wheat combined with the citrus of orange peel and spice of coriander conveyed through a fluffy body is unbeatable.

Wit beer is a product of malted barley and a large portion of unmalted wheat. Unmalted grains haven't undergone the process that causes the grain to create the enzymes necessary to break down the starches into sugars in the mash. Getting unmalted grains to a point where they could be used for the making of beer requires a lot of extra effort and time, both of which aren't something that most brewers have to spare. The use of raw grains would have to be the product of necessity, not creativity, in most cases. Necessity is the reason for Wit beer. Hundreds of years ago, in Belgium, taxes were levied on breweries based on the full capacity of their mash tun, the kettle where malted grains are soaked to allow enzymes a chance to break down the starches into usable sugars. Soon a second vessel was allowed to house and work raw, unmalted grains. Brewers, in their constant pursuit of more beer and less taxing, packed these secondary silos with unmalted grains, most often wheat, and used creative techniques to convert them into usable product. Witbier was born out of the same bootlegger's spirit that eventually gave birth to bath tub gin and moonshine.

Wit ales have become increasingly popular in recent years, but this wasn't always the case. In the 1950s, Wit was bordering on extinction in Belgium and it looked like it was only a matter of time before the style was lost entirely to history. In 1966, a young man named Pierre Celis in the Belgian town of Hoegaarden erected a brewery that would produce the wheat beer his town had once been known for. The public rejoiced and flocked back to their beloved white ales. The brewery was a huge success, but a devastating fire brought Pierre and his crew to their knees financially. Eventually the brewery was sold to Interbrew, an international conglomerate that would go on to become Inbev before their purchase of Anheuser-Busch and the birth of AB-Inbev. Pierre moved to Austin, Texas and opened the Celis brewery. Celis would eventually suffer from another buyout, this time from Miller Brewing. The brewery was unfortunately before my time, but I've heard that it was amazing. I've even heard rumors that the building is still standing. That was years ago and it seemed that, like White ale at one time, the Celis name would be lost to beer history. Michigan Brewing, in cooperation with Pierre Celis, is now brewing the once famous beers and shipping them back to the Lone Star state.



Today, when you order a Hoegaarden or a Blue Moon, you'll often be served a hazy, straw-colored beer with a rocky white head and a slice of orange jammed on the side of the glass. The orange slice isn't tradition, much the same way that a lemon slice isn't traditionally served with German weizen. But, unlike the case of the lemon and the weizen, the orange slice garnish for a white ale at least has some logic. White ales are brewed with two spices, one of which is orange peel. Garnishing a glass of wit with an orange will bring out those citrusy orange qualities and amplify them. If you want more of that citrus zing in your hot weather refreshment, go for it!

No matter how you drink it, if you sit anything on the side, or if you include the yeast in your glass, wit beer is refreshing and complex while maintaining a simplicity and balance. Witbier speaks to the ingenuity of cash strapped brewers and the creativity of people faced with adversity. Brewers today are in similar positions and coming up with equally ingenious and delicious ways of surviving. So, this summer, when you're mowing the lawn or enjoying the outdoors, enjoy a White ale and the success of the bootlegger's spirit. Hoegaarden

Not the original white ale, but the beer responsible for the revival of the style. Hoegaarden is the ruler by which all other wits are measured. A "by the book" balance of citrus, spicy coriander and tart, refreshing wheat make it an easy starting place for the style or a nice change of pace when you want something simple and well executed.

Celis White

A Texas original now being brewed in the Midwest, Celis White is similar to Hoegaarden in the beer's ability to strike a balance between citrus, spice and wheat tartness. A bit fuller in the body and lightly sweeter than Pierre's first brewery, Celis does a good job of nailing down the style.

Allagash White

A recent Gold medal winner at the 2010 World Beer Cup in the Belgian-style Wheat beer category, Allagash White is an American take on the style. A slightly more noticeable hop profile shows the western influence along with a big coriander presence and more noticeable citrus zip. More, more, more is the American way, but balance and finesse in conjunction with the "bigger is better" attitude has made Allagash the name for Belgian beers in the US.

Wittekerke

No article profiling the glories of a beer style for Summer heat would be complete without a beer in cans. Canned sunshine, Wittekerke white ale is all citrus and tart wheat, with just enough coriander and hops to create some semblance of balance.

Unibroue Blanche de Chambly

One of my all time favorites for the style, the "White of Chambly" is the white ale from the makers of La Fin du Monde. I'm a sucker for the peppery bite that large amounts of coriander offers when combined with just the right amount of citrus. Blanche de Chambly packs all of that flavor into the perfect fluffy wheat body and makes it refreshing.



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:

Deschutes Jubel 2010	22oz
Green Flash Le Freak Belgian IPA	22oz
Brewdog / Mikkeller Devine Rebel	
Scotch Barrel-aged Barleywine	12oz
Widmer Deadlift Imperial IPA	4pk
Saint Arnold Summer Pils	6pk
Sam Adams Longshot Variety Pack	6pk
Otter Creek Summer Ale	6pk

