

News: Samichlaus is back

Notes from the road, October, 2000

The most famous Christmas beer in Europe, Samichlaus ("Santa Claus", in Swiss German) is being revived after four years' absence.

Traditionally, this immensely strong (14 per cent alcohol by volume) rich, darkish, lager was brewed each year on St Nicholas' Day, December 6. It matured for the best part of 12 months, gaining strength in the lagering tank, and was released on the same date of the following year, with a vintage date. Of the world's super-strong lagers, Samichlaus was the most complex and satisfying. It had a reddish chestnut colour; a brandyish aroma; a firm, oily, body; creamy and cherryish flavours; and a warming, spicy, peppery, finish.

The beer originally made by Hürlimann, of Switzerland, was withdrawn when that brewery was acquired by the same country's Feldschlösschen. Now, that latter has reached an agreement with the Eggenberg Castle brewery, of Austria, to bring the beer back to life. The revived Santa Claus will be launched at the brewery on Oct. 20. It will be made available in the United States by Wetten Importers, of Lorton, Virginia. This company already imports Eggenberg's Urbock 23 (at 9.6 abv) and Nessie "Whisky malt" beer.

What's to like? Swedish beer...

"I was one of those women who drink wine, and think they 'don't like' beer," recalls Marianne Wallberg [see image below]. At the time, her job was to organise conferences and trade shows. A businesswoman has male colleagues, and she was pressed one day to join a few over a brew. "I asked what was the difference between the beers being offered, and no one knew. I thought that was a gap in the education of both consumers and trade. I read every book I could find, and finished up organising classes and a festival." Marianne started the Stockholm Beer Festival. She now runs it with Helene Reuterwall, a former importer of Sam Adams' Boston Lager. Tasting notes from this year's festival will follow soon. Next year's, tentatively slated for September, will be their tenth.

New Jersey

From a tutored tasting presented on behalf of Beers International, at Teaneck, N.J. These beers were new to me:

Blackfish. A claret-colored ale of 5.2 per cent alcohol by volume. Malt-accented, but with a toasty dryness and crispness, and a suggestion of coffee (a breakfast beer?). Reminiscent of some English interpretations of an Old Ale. Inspired by a bartender who blended Flying Fish

Extra Pale Ale and Porter. Blackfish is made with some Belgian chocolate malt, Magnum and U.S. Fuggles, and dry-hopped with Mount Hood. Cask-conditioned. From Flying Fish, of Cherry Hill, N.J.

Climax Oktoberfest. A beautifully balanced interpretation of this style, at 6.0 per cent. Pale orange color; smooth body, at the lighter end for the style; firm malt character; deceptively delicate development of flavors; spicy hop finish. All the malts from the German house Durst, including the highly modified Turbopils. All hops Spalt, but in three additions. From Climax, of Roselle Park, N.J.

Ramstein Oktoberfest. Slightly lower in alcohol, at 5.5 per cent, but fuller in color and body. A firm, rounded, maltiness, with some grainy dryness. Made with a small proportion of wheat (15 per cent of the grist). Malts from Weyermann, of Bamberg. A Czech lager yeast is used. This is the first lager from the Ramstein/High Point wheat beer brewery, in Butler, N.J.

Ramstein Winter Wheat. Powerful, enveloping, warming. Chocolatey, raisiny, clovey, complex. A huge double bock, from a gravity of 21.5 Plato (1086), producing 9.5 per cent alcohol. Fifty-five percent of the grist is malted wheat; the rest Pilsener, Munich and chocolate malt. A wheat beer yeast is used.

Minnesota

From a tutored tasting presented on behalf of the newly-formed Minnesota Guild of Brewers. Wishing to remain "neutral ground", the host brewpub, Sherlock's Home, in Minnetonka, did not feature a beer in the tasting.

Loose Moose. A bronze lager with a cookie-like firmness, some orange-honey malt flavors and a flowery dryness of finish. Described by brewer Brian Schiebe as a work in progress. Developed from a Munich Helles style of lager at 12 Plato (1048), and an intended alcohol content of around 5.0, but given the Bavarian "Ice Bock" treatment to emerge with a strength of closer to 6.0 and the character of a May Bock (in October). Gambrinus honey malt and Hallertau Mittelfrüh hops are signature ingredients, From Vine Park, a stylish brewpub in downtown St Paul.

Hoptoberfest. The first-ever seasonal brew from Hops, the Florida-based chain of 70-odd brewpubs. This Oktoberfest variation is from the branch in Maple Grove, Minn. The bright orange-colored brew has a restrained but flowery, Saaz, hop bouquet; and a light smooth, malt accent, with a gentle hint of barley-sugar. The use of a Kölsch yeast, unusual in an Oktoberfest, seems to have been quite an influence in its clean, delicate, character.

Mariner Mild. An excellent example of this English style, hard to find in its native country. Mild ales are meant to slip down easily, be sufficiently modest in alcohol to sustain a thirsty session, and to have enough sweetness to restore a little energy to a manual worker at the end of his

shift. They are often dark brown in color. This is an excellent example of a Dark Mild, at 3.8 per cent alcohol by volume: soft and smooth, with well-rounded, more-ish flavors that lightly suggest black chocolate, and a wafery, grainy, dryness in the finish. From Fitger's, in the port city of Duluth. A Mild Ale malt from Briess, of Wisconsin, is an influential ingredient, with East Kent Golding hops.

Martin's Bitter. Another English style, named after brewer Jeff Martin. This one from Great Waters, a brewpub designed to produce cask-conditioned ales. This pale bronze Bitter is another "session" ale, modest in alcohol (at about 4.0 per cent) and intended to be refreshing and soothing. English bitters come in a variety of strengths, but they are never very potent. Nor are they usually as bitter as they sound. This one has a lightly spicy, tobacco-ish, hop aroma and flavor, and nicely cleansing acidity in the finish. It is brewed with Paul's malt, from Britain, and dry-hopped with East Kent Goldings. The brewpub is in a beautifully restored building (designed before World War I and constructed afterwards) that was once the offices of the Hamm's brewery. It is in downtown St Paul.

Saison Goux. A seasonal summer brew modelled on those made in the French-speaking part of Belgium. As summer brews go, Belgian saisons are quite strong. This one has around 5.5 per cent alcohol. Very spicy (it reminded me of aniseed), but with a fruity tartness giving it a summery, quenching, character even in October. The fruitiness reminded me of apricot. Some people thought dessert pears or apples. Very aromatic, too. Candy sugar is an influential ingredient in Saison Goux. So are Belgian malts. The yeast is from Belgium, too. No herbs or spices, though they are sometimes used in this style. From the Minneapolis branch of the brewpub chain Rock Bottom.

Wild Brunette. I love the name. Sexist? It was suggested by a woman: Laura Subak (she is of Slovakian origin), wife of brewer John Moore. "Everyone has a Blonde Ale," Laura observed to John. "Why not do something more interesting?" She is a Brunette, and John took the hint. Wild? That is a reference to wild rice, which accounts for 20 per cent of the grist, along with Munich and chocolate malts. The result is a nutty, dryish, complex, flavorsome, smooth, ale with a ruby color. An Altbier yeast is used. From Barley John's brewpub, in New Brighton, Minn.

Ol' Mick Porter. Sounds Irish, but this interpretation is less dry and roasty, more malty and textured. Some sweetness in the background, and very long flavors, moving to a cookie-like dryness. Lots of chocolate malt, and perhaps some faintly smoky spiciness from Whitbread yeast. A beautifully constructed brew. From the Town Hall brewpub, Minneapolis.

Total Insanity. Friends said brewer David Berg would be totally insane to try and sell a Rauch ("smoked", in German) beer in a brewpub attached to a bowling alley in a suburb. Just too conservative a market, perhaps? David defies the odds with this drinkable but flavorsome example. The smokiness might shock at first: it tasted like oak-smoke to me, though it is actually beech-smoked malt, from Weyermann, of Bamberg. Behind the smoked is a malty sweetness. Not strictly a Bamberg-style smoked beer. This one is top-fermenting, its flavors

rounded by a hint of citrus from Ringwood yeast. A distinctive brew from the Water Tower, in Eden Prairie, Minn.



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