

I find peaks of perfection in Rocky brew pubs

Myra Breckenridge, an American satire by Gore Vidal, was turned into an ephemeral movie starring Raquel Welch. It was hard to dismiss incorrect thoughts about Ms. Welch as we drove between the peaks of the Rocky Mountains to the town of Breckenridge, Colorado.

In frontier days, Breckenridge (established 1860) was a gold town. People panned in the rivers that run off the Rockies. Amid the snow and sagebrush, Breckenridge, on the Blue River, still has piles of gravel left by old dredgers.

It is still a town of wooden buildings, though most of them are now shops for skiers and other tourists. One is a brew pub.

There are gold and silver towns all over the Rockies, most of them now catering for skiing and tourism, and a growing number with brew pubs.

Colorado now has about two dozen breweries, which is not bad for a state with a population not much bigger than that of Greater Manchester. Almost all of them specialise in ales rather than lagers but that is true of most American brew pubs.

I have only once attempted to ski and it was not a success, but I have done some very worthwhile beer drinking in Colorado. Even with air tickets, it can be cheaper than France for a holiday, and the natives are very friendly.

At the Breckenridge Brewery and Pub I enjoyed a fruity, unfiltered Mountain Wheat Beer (1050 original gravity); a dry hoppy, End of Trail Ale (1044) and a chocolatey, creamy Oatmeal Stout (1052).

Just to the east of Breckenridge is the Continental Divide. We were now equidistant from the Pacific and the Atlantic. We sat on the rock and shared a bottle of Chimay.

We were at 11,990 feet and it would take about an hour and a half to descend through rocky passes, to Denver, the only major city in Colorado. Denver, which likes to call itself "The Mile High City", has for the past few years been the home of the Great American Beer Festival, which started in the nearby college town of Boulder. Last year's festival had just under 1,000 beers, from more than 200 breweries.

This year's will be held on 21 and 22 October. The city itself has no fewer than four brew pubs and two micros.

One of the gold medallists at last year's festival was the aptly named Champion brew pub, with its grainy, nutty Home Run Brown Ale.

The Champion is an example of that American phenomenon, the "sports bar." These places are usually decked with sporting memorabilia and often have large televisions showing games.

I enjoyed my brown ale then, the absence of any Rugby League, made excuse and left. My favourite Denver brew pub, and one of the best in America, also has a sporting element but one that is separated from the serious-drinking area. This is the Wynkoop, with an upstairs room accommodating 22 pool tables.

I have tended to concentrate my attention downstairs, where I have enjoyed such delights as an IPA aged on oak chips, an ESB and a yet-hop pier SOB. Whatever you may think those initials mean, I am assured that they indicate Special Old Bitter.

This beer reminded me of Gale's HSB, though I don't believe that has a month on dry hops. I have also much enjoyed a brew called Churchyard, with a resemblance to Old Peculier.

The word Wynkoop would seem to derive from the Dutch or Flemish for a wine merchant, but in this instance it was a surname. The original Wynkoop was a general, known for his sympathies with the Native Americans, and one of the founders of Denver.

The brew pub is in a former warehouse in the old town. In the middle of the modern downtown shopping area is a brew pub Bottom. It's industrial chic and it is a popular place for a quick meal.

In this part of the United States, there are Native American references everywhere, which explains the name Arapahoe Amber for a leafily hoppy ale.

How the fruity Falcon Pale Ale, of its name, I never did discover. Even less Molly's Titanic, a perfectly sinkable brown ale. I always associated the Titanic with Stoke-on-Trent...

The fourth brew pub is a Denver offshoot of Breckenridge. I haven't visited this metropolitan branch, but I did sample its similar beers at the festival. I also sampled the bottle-conditioned ales of Lonetree, one of the two micros. These include a fruity, perfumy Cream Ale; the sweeter Sunset Red; and the chocolatey Iron Horse Dark.

The newer Tabernash Brewing Company, with some very well-respected principals, has only just opened its doors. If not before, I certainly hope to taste its beers in October

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