

Huber of Wisconsin

A personal tribute to the man who made Augsburger

Even today, many Americans believe that Wisconsin is the beer state. In fact, its brewing industry was already in decline when I began to write about beer. One of the last independent family brewers was Fred Huber. He was also one of the first brewers to welcome -- and assist -- my pioneering efforts to write informed books on beer for the consumer.

Despite his manifestly good intentions, he nearly brought my career to a premature end. In about 1980, driving me to his brewery, he was enthusing about a new beer, and momentarily distracted from the road. He turned into a freeway when an oncoming car, being driven fast, was very close. Had the driver of the other car not been alert, it would have slammed into the front passenger side of ours. "I can see the headlines now," observed a chastened Fred: "Brewer kills world's leading beer writer." Having survived, I was grateful for the sobriquet.

This near-miss did not dim his enthusiasm for driving me. After dinner at a Chicago tavern called the Golden Ox, he somehow persuaded all his staff physically to deny me access to a phone. I wanted to call a cab, but he was determined to chauffeur me home. First, though, he had to finish a card game of interminable complexity. Every time I mentioned that I had an early flight next day, he sent over another glass of beer. On that occasion, he was ordering an imported German Weissbier. Fred had visions of being the first brewer in the U.S. to revive wheat beers, but he never quite managed it. (His local rival Hibernia, in Eau Claire was first in the state, but San Francisco's Anchor Brewery was first nationally).

Fred also had visions of achieving a substantial presence in the Chicago market. He collaborated with the famous Berghoff restaurant for a time, but the resultant beers were a hard sell in the on-premise market. "Why should I stock a beer that advertises another restaurant?" was a typical response. It might work in a smaller, cozier, city, but Chicagoland is a robustly competitive.

He tried to rescue the city's Peter Hand brewery, with a crisply hoppy beer called Van Merritt. The Second City remained stubbornly loyal to Heileman's Old Style, from La Crosse, Wis. It took even Budweiser decades to shift that obstacle.

For some years, Fred retained the ambition of launching a hoppier Van Merritt at his family brewery in Monroe, Wis. Another Chicago brand, Augsburger, had found its way (via Potosi, Wis.) to Monroe. Inspired by an encounter with a German brewer, Fred Huber turned Augsburger into the hoppiest U.S. lager of its time. "Augsburger embraces the brooding bitterness of Spalt with the spicy finish of Hallertau," commented my 1982 "Pocket Guide to Beer." As a "domestic super-premium," Augsburger won a reputation not only in Chicago, but nationally. It was his greatest success.

Its dark counterpart was one of the few flavorsome Munich-style lagers of the day. At a tutored tasting for a restaurant in pre-micro Seattle, I lavishly described Augsburger Dark only to discover that the audience had been served the regular golden version. Someone from the restaurant's management had been deputed to order the samples, but she had not understood that beer could be dark. I had thought Seattle had the makings of a sophisticated beer city, but I was ahead of my time.

I never quite stopped expecting new beers from Fred Huber. Then, few days ago, he died. At the memorial service, his son John began with a litany of brands that had at one time or another been Huber's:

Alps, Andechs, Augsburger, Bavarian Club, Bohemian Club, Braumeister, Dempsey's, Golden Glow, Old Chicago, Old Crown, Old German, Peter Hand, Regal Brau, Rheinlander, Van Merritt, Wisconsin Club, Wisconsin Gold Label, Zodiac.

Fred was entrepreneurial, charming, cosmopolitan and urbane but his family connections in Germany stood him in good stead in rural Bavaria. It was an extraordinary coup to obtain a licence to brew the beers of the Benedictine monastery of Andechs. Perhaps it was just as well nonetheless that the Huber brewery, which had made excellent beers, never captured the character of Andechs. The beer belongs at the monastery. There is no sustainable logic in brewing an abbey beer outside the cloister

There was always another deal. Equipment supplier Alan Dikty, of ABT, remembers a discussion at Chicago's grand old Drake Hotel. During a difficult period in Nicaragua, the dominant brewery there had mechanical problems. The owning family was in town to discuss a brewing contract that would have been financially useful for Fred. At dinner, they crowed over the defeat of the Sandinistas. Their tone was that of feudal overlords, anxious that the common people knew their place.

They knew that they could regard the capitalist U.S. as an ally, but perhaps did not understand American notions of democracy, meritocracy and civil rights. As Dikty was

drawn into the conversation, he struggled to be diplomatic. Later, Fred thanked him. Dikty especially recalls Fred's description of the family: "A bunch of Bourbon bastards." He was not referring to whiskey.

Fred at one stage sold the brewery, then bought it back. He always had a new idea, some fresh dream to discuss. His profligacy with ideas reflected his generosity. When he was not sending me beers, he was loading me with the other products of America's Dairyland. How many wheels of Wisconsin Jack could one man eat, let alone roll through O'Hare and Heathrow?

At the funeral reception at the Chicago Brauhaus, there was an open bar, notes Dikty. "Fred buying the drinks again -- one last time."

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