

Ullage and Spillage

by J.Random

I note a sticker on a six-pack says St Ambroise oatmeal stout was voted world's best stout by RateBeer.com in Feb. 2006. I also see, on that site, it had dropped to number two by September. I am not sure how impressed I am by these stats, since a Danish stout called Mikkeller Beer Geek Breakfast was rated number 1, number 5, and number 11. However, the extent to which I am truly impressed by Bière Noire À L'Avoine can be judged by the

fact a third of the space in my beer fridge has been devoted to it for 10 years or more.

Even after voyaging from Montreal and inching through the liquor store system, it still

takes a while to soften its hard, roasty edges so I keep a lot in store. The Noire I am drinking right now has a best-before date of April 2007 and I'm sure it would have continued to improve if it had not ended up as the last of the batch today.

Perhaps that was an oblique introduction to discussing the oatmeal stouts of BC but seeing that sticker was the third and final prod that kick-started this article. My second shove came from discussion of my comment on a developing B.C. style of IPA (*What's Brewing Volume 16 No 4, July 2006*). It prompted the thought that if there is one beer style B.C. brewers really do well it is oatmeal stout. The first nudge to start this article was hearing/reading a while ago, perhaps in a certain brewing news, B.C. does not have a beer style. My initial response was: "this is not a bad thing." The great brewing nations Germany, Belgium and Britain do not each have a beer style. Thankfully they all have many. I then thought "I really should write about B.C. beer styles one of these days." Since then I have been having one, after another, of those days ... But



now it's fall, and a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of heavy beers.

B.C.'s oatmeal stouts can be readily subdivided by their availability. Three micro breweries supply them year round in bottle. Nelson Blackheart oatmeal stout is one of my long-time stand-bys available in six packs of standard bottles in many government liquor stores and maybe a few private ones. It is marketed as a marriage between an Irish dry stout and an oatmeal stout and who am I to argue. Recent samplings seemed to be more sweet and chocolaty than I remember. Look for Phillips oatmeal stout in larger bottles with references to breakfast cereal. I note the chap on the label has recently changed out of his Quaker law-suit into something more comfortable. Old Yale Sasquatch stout, also sold in larger bottles in many liquor stores, can be just superb when on form, like drinking an oatmeal choc-chip cookie. Oatmeal is not in the name but it is mentioned as an ingredient on the label. Note that Lighthouse Brewing's Keepers stout, though widely available in cans, is an oatmeal-free stout (what an interesting concept).

Crannog and Storm Brewing also supply products, not billed as oatmeal stouts, but both benefiting from significant amounts of soft oat texture and both have enormously complex flavours. Both sell only on draft, in limited geographic areas, mainly in restaurants. Both are worth a great deal of effort to seek out. Crannog's, Back Hand of God is an organic stout brewed on a farm in Sorrento. You have a good chance of finding it at the Raven Pub in Deep Cove, and a list of places to find Crannog beers is posted on their web site www.crannogales.com. Storm Brewing's Black Plague is brewed in a workshop down the quieter end of Commercial Drive. Just a hint of real liquorice root gives this beer its distinctive taste. The best place to get the plague is The Whip in Mount Pleasant but Storm also has a list of outlets on their web site:

www.stormbrewingvancouver.com.

At least eight of B.C.'s brewpubs have oatmeal stouts as regular or seasonal brews. These also require seeking out, since they are each typically sold only out of one pub. I am not going

to venture into exceptions to this rule, since I am bound to make an excessive number of mistakes. Mission Springs' oatmeal stout, together with Crannog and Storm's stealth-oatmeal stouts, make my top three from B.C. It is also very easy for me to rank these three. The best is the one I had most recently and the second best is the one I had before that. Steamworks' Heroica oatmeal stout is also right up there in quality. It alternates with Coal porter and it used to be tough to know which one you were going to find but I now see their web site www.steamworks.com provides indications of which is on tap. Central City's Steelhead oatmeal stout is the perfect session beer for the stout aficionado. Beautifully balanced, it goes down very easily, and at 4.2% alcohol, you can keep drinking that much longer before the little guy with the shillelagh smashes you in the back of the head.

Living in Vancouver, it is not often I get to Victoria, and somehow there is usually a beer festival on when I do. Nevertheless, I always make a point to drop into Swans pub to have Buckerfield Brewery Swans oatmeal stout. Thankfully, it always seems to be on tap when I am there. Perhaps our editor can provide some indication whether this is the norm. (*yes, nearly always available on draft and if not you may repair to the beer store next door for bottled version - ed*) Swans' web site www.swanshotel.com/brewpub does not make any definitive statement on availability.



Canoe and Spinnakers in Victoria plus DIX and Yaletown in Vancouver all have very pleasing oatmeal stouts as occasional or seasonal beers and it is a great pity they are not more regularly offered. If they had them on permanently, I would have devoted more space to them here. Spinnakers always seems to have its tasty Tsarist Imperial stout available (wonder what that would be like with just a touch of oatmeal). On occasion, Granville Island, DIX. Taylors Crossing and Yaletown also produce oatmeal-free stouts.

For those that have tried the above-mentioned products and did not enjoy them: look for the stout with a pure white head. That's a good indication it doesn't have any of that flavour you don't like. And finally a word for people tempted to try stout for the first time: **beware of the dark side. If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny; consume it, you will.***

* With apologies to George Lucas ☐