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ALES OF THE TIMES

## Chug This? Shame on You

By ERIC ASIMOV

**I** KNOW more than a few beer fanatics, and though they are fine people, almost all have an ax to grind. Why is wine, they want to know, venerated as a complex, sophisticated beverage that belongs on the dinner table of every food lover, while beer is essentially lumped with demolition derbies and monster truck pulls?

Good question, even if by confronting wine they are picking the wrong enemy. No one has damaged the reputation of beer as much as the big beer companies, which through their own advertising have created the unfortunate image of the beer lover as bottom feeder. Nonetheless, the fans are on a crusade to prove that traditional beer, not the insipid supermarket stuff, is as fine a drink as wine to grace the table, if not better.

I refuse to get into a battle over whether wine or beer is superior: is painting better than sculpture? But I know that if you need to make the case that beer can have all the complexity and intrigue of a fine wine, Exhibit A has to be farmhouse ales.

As you might guess, farmhouse ales were historically the products of an agricultural society. In the days before refrigeration, when summer was too hot for brewing, farmers in the French-speaking part of Belgium and across the border in France made beer in the winter and spring that they could put away for summer consumption.

Today the Belgian beers, which have come to be known as saisons, are typically light-bodied and tart, with a crisp bitterness that can be deliciously refreshing. Sometimes they are flavored with pepper, orange rind or other spices and botanicals, but they share an acidity and complexity that leaves you wanting more. The French beers, known as bières de garde ("beers for keeping"), tend to be darker, earthier and maltier and to have more herbal flavors and a touch of sweetness rather than bitterness.

As different as the two styles can be, they have a lot in common beyond historical ties. These beers do not come in pop-top cans. They are usually put into 750-milliliter bottles — just like wine — complete with corks. They are treated seriously by the few Belgian and French brewers who still produce them. The styles have become increasingly popular with American microbrewers, who have achieved some excellent results. One more thing, as the Dining section's tasting panel found out: these beers, historically brewed for summer, are great year round.

For the tasting, my colleague Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Joe Carroll, owner of Spuyten Duyvil, a bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that specializes in Belgian beers, and Phil Markowski, brewmaster at the Southampton Publick House, a restaurant and brewery in Southampton on Long Island. Mr. Markowski has also written a book, "Farmhouse Ales: Culture and Craftsmanship in the Belgian Tradition," to be published next month by Brewers Publications of Boulder, Colo.

We were all impressed by the superb quality of the beers. Most of the bottles were fresh, which is often a problem with imported beers if they are not handled carefully and kept refrigerated. Ms. Fabricant noted that the bières de garde had nutlike flavors while the saisons were fruitier. She described the saisons as winelike, a comment that may both gladden and enrage beer partisans.

As we tasted the saisons, in their gorgeous hues of pale orange, and the bières de garde, in different shades of amber, I felt as if I were transported to the countryside in preindustrial Flanders when beers like these were consumed not only for refreshment, but because they were nutritional and, in some cases, safer than drinking water. It was a pleasant feeling, though purely imaginary. As Mr. Markowski pointed out, nobody knows how those old farmhouse ales tasted. They were not produced commercially, and written recipes and descriptions are practically nonexistent.

As a result, brewers have enormous leeway to experiment, and the prevailing styles today most likely have little to do with what was typical then. For one thing, farmhouse ales are now much higher in alcohol, generally 6 to 9 percent, than what sustained the working farmhand a few hundred years ago.

"Some feel the bière de garde name today is pure marketing," Mr. Markowski said.

While that may be true, it seemed to me that the 11 bières de garde we tasted had more similarities of weight, texture and overall flavor than differences. Our favorite, the Ambrée, or amber, from La Choulette, was as complex as a good Burgundy, yet harmonious too. We also liked another beer from La Choulette, de Noël. (See, it's not just for summer.) This beer, though less alcoholic, had even earthier flavors and like most of the bières de garde would be great with cheese.

Only two of the bières de garde were American, but both made our list. The Bière d'Art from Heavyweight Brewing in particular impressed us with its creamy texture and spicy-herbal complexity.

As much as I liked the bières de garde, I loved the taut nerviness of the saisons, which dance through the mouth with a lightness that rarely fails to refresh. Dupont is probably the most famous producer of saison, and we all loved the Moinette, a beer of both substance and subtlety. The Darbyste from Blaugies was similarly a balanced, lively beer. The Fantôme, the third Belgian brew among our five saisons, by contrast, was heavily flavored with orange. It was not sweet, but it was full and round in the mouth rather than angular, like more typical saisons.

The two American brews in the group included another atypical saison, from Pizza Port in Carlsbad, Calif. This beer, SPF 8, has won lots of praise in beer circles, and it was easy to see why. "Great, winy and dark," was how Mr. Carroll described it, and yes, unlike the other saisons, which were orange in color, this one was as dark as stout. Yet it still had the tanginess of a saison.

The other American brew, the Cuvée des Fleurs, brewed by Mr. Markowski, was more in the saison mainstream, with spicy orange flavors. "My favorite," Ms. Fabricant said.

Sadly, American farmhouse ales like the Southampton and the Pizza Port are not always easy to find. Sometimes you have to go to the brewery. The French and Belgian ales are more widely available at stores that specialize in great beers. But these are beers that can stand up to even the most determined wine snobbery. Simply pour into a tall glass, raise pinkie and enjoy.

## **Tasting Report: Descendants of a Farmhouse Tradition**

### **BIÈRES DE GARDE**

#### **La Choulette Ambrée**

**\$6 France 750 milliliters**

**\*\*\* 1/2**

Complex and balanced, with classic flavors including fruit, herbs, spices, coffee, malt and caramel. (Importer: Shelton Brothers, Belchertown, Mass.)

#### **Heavyweight Brewing Bière d'Art**

**\$7 Ocean Township, N.J. 750 milliliters**

**\*\*\***

Spicy, creamy and both sweet and bitter, with persistent flavors of orange, black pepper and herbs.

#### **La Choulette de Noël**

**\$8 France 750 milliliters**

**\*\*\***

Smoky and toasty, with flavors of dried fruit, malt, chocolate and chicory; good with cheese. (Shelton Brothers, Belchertown, Mass.)

#### **McKenzie Brew House Bavay**

**\$9 Glen Mills, Pa. 750 milliliters**

**\*\* 1/2**

Complex and creamy, with aromas of smoke, herbs, dried fruit and malt.

#### **Theillier La Bavaisienne**

**\$9 France 750 milliliters**

**\*\* 1/2**

Aromas of dill and cucumbers, with subtle, earthy flavors. (Shelton Brothers, Belchertown, Mass.)

### **SAISONS**

#### **Dupont Moinette**

**\$8 Belgium 750 milliliters**

**\*\*\* 1/2**

Delicious and alive in the mouth, with the aroma of sea air and crisp, subtle flavors of fruits and spices. (Vanberg & DeWulf, Cooperstown, N.Y.)

**Pizza Port SPF 8**

**\$10 Carlsbad, Calif. 750 milliliters**

**\*\*\***

Unusual but successful, with the roasted-chocolate character of stout, yet tangy and refreshing.

**Southampton Publick House Cuvée des Fleurs**

**\$10 Southampton, N.Y. 750 milliliters**

**\*\*\***

Perfumed aromas of orange and spices, with beautiful herbal flavors; nicely bitter at the end.

**Blaugies Darbyste**

**\$9 Belgium 750 milliliters**

**\*\* 1/2**

Tart, lively and spicy, with subtle, balanced flavors. (Shelton Brothers, Belchertown, Mass.)

**Fantôme Saison**

**\$8 Belgium 750 milliliters**

**\*\***

Intense — maybe too intense — flavors of orange, peach and strawberry; a lot going on. (Shelton Brothers, Belchertown, Mass.)