

BEER BUZZ

The Belgians are Coming!

by Joey Williams



In the 1980s, American craft beer was booming and we were on our way back to resembling the pre-Prohibition era. All manner of English and German beers were being brewed traditionally and an American-style of brewing had been created. The world of beer was our buffet and we were feasting with an

insatiable appetite. There was, however, one large stretch of "food" that had yet to be touched, the diverse and esoteric beers of Belgium. There was no large group of Belgian immigrants that set out from their homeland to find prosperity and freedom in America, bringing with them their rich brewing heritage. Belgium wasn't on the list of "must see" countries in Europe at the time. No style guidelines or standard practices were present when it came to Belgian beer. None of the factors that put the English and German beers in the hands of American consumers were present for Belgian beer and that made things very difficult for importers.

There was a select few that knew of the treasures that Belgium had yet to release, who believed that given a chance these beers would thrive. Charles Finkel, a "wine man" by trade and reputation, was one of these believers, and in 1978 founded Merchant du Vin. In 1979, Finkel came out swinging with Lindemans Lambics, a line of fruit infused beers fermented with wild yeast strains and matured in wood vessels. Those that were fortunate enough to be in an area where these beers were sold went wild. On the heels of Charles's success, in 1980, Manneken-Brussels Imports was founded and in 1983 they introduced the masses to the brothers at the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont, the brewers of Chimay. The seeds were planted and it was only a matter of time before they began to sprout.



In 1989, Jeff Lebesch, an electrical engineer and homebrew enthusiast from Colorado, travelled to Europe. On the seat of a "fat tired" mountain bike, Lebesch toured the great cities of European brewing tradition and discovered the beers of Belgium.



When he arrived back in the states, Lebesch immediately began brewing beers to recreate the experiences he'd had in Belgium. The first two beers were a monastic-inspired strong brown Abbey ale and a bready, well-balanced amber, Fat Tire. Offering the two beers to friends and homebrewers alike, Lebesch and his wife, Kim Jordan, soon found a following and established New Belgium Brewing out of their basement. New Belgium quickly outgrew the hodgepodge of repurposed dairy in the basement brewery. Their lineup has expanded well beyond the two beers born in a basement. With seven year-round offerings, five seasonal and a new lineup of highly sought after specialties, called Lips of Faith, the brewery offers something for every taste and a great place to start discovering Belgian brewing. I'm partial to 1554, a rich, dark beer with lots of roasted flavors, and Abbey, the original strong dark that started it all. Today New Belgium is one of the largest craft breweries in the US and stands as a testament to what good beer can do in the right hands.

The popularity of New Belgium and Belgian imports has inspired countless stateside breweries and beers, two of the most notable in my mind are Allagash of Portland, Maine and Ommegang of Cooperstown, New York. Both breweries personify the Belgian brewing traditions that craft brewers fell in love with and combine them with a domestic love of pushing boundaries. Ommegang Three Philosophers, a strong dark ale blended with a small portion of sour cherry limbic, and Allagash Curieux, a strong Belgian Tripel aged for months in Jim Beam barrels, are two of my all time favorite beers.

Belgian influences have now infiltrated the American beer scene in the same ways that English and German traditions did in the beginning, but there's still a lot to be learned. In 2006, Vinnie Cilurzo, of Russian River Brewing, and Adam Avery, of Avery Brewing, blended their two Belgian-style beers, both named Salvation, to create Collaboration not Litigation. The proceeds from the sale of Collaboration helped to send Tomme Arthur of The Lost Abbey, Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head, Rob Todd of Allagash, Vinnie and Adam on a trip through Belgium to learn more about the traditions of the beer rich land. Collaboration not Litigation is made available every year and is a great treat.

The American beer scene is now a mixture of influences from the world's great brewing nations and our own ingenuity and creativity; it's time to start giving back. Drink up! ☺



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