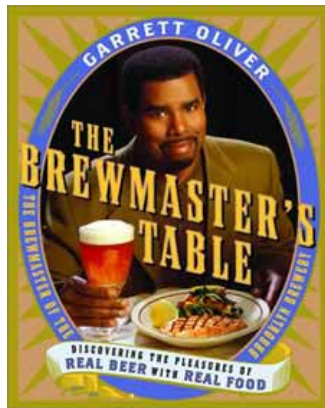


BEER BUZZ

The Brewmaster's Thanksgiving Table

by Joey Williams

I'm not usually the sort of person that looks forward to the holidays. That's not to say that I'm a scrooge and I dread the holidays and wish them gone. I just don't get all that excited about them. This year, however, I've been looking forward to Thanksgiving like you wouldn't believe. I have had a four foot by six foot Thanksgiving turkey, beautifully roasted, hanging on the wall adjacent to my beer cooler. The reason? A Brooklyn Brewery display inspired by Thanksgiving, the book "The Brewmaster's Table" and meeting Garret Oliver.



You see, last month the planets aligned, the fates conspired and Justin had business take him out of town. I was called upon to represent Spec's at a lunch with Garret Oliver, brewmaster of Brooklyn Brewery and author of "The Brewmaster's Table". The lunch was easily a top highlight of this year for me in regards to beer. I got to talk with a brewing legend about everything from current trends, special releases, their presence in Texas and his presence on an episode of Iron Chef. The man is a wealth of knowledge when it comes to food and beer and was a "no-brainer" when the Food Network's Iron Chef America used beer as the secret ingredient. The Brewmaster's Table, a beer and food pairing reference, is an award winning book used by professional and home chefs to heighten the beer and food experience. The book is an absolute must have for anyone interested in beer and food history or food and beer pairings.

Having Mr. Oliver's knowledge and expertise within earshot and doing my best to compose myself, I asked which of his beers he would serve at a holiday meal. The response he gave inspired the display that now sits at the end of the cooler at the midtown Spec's in Houston that's been tormenting me with that monstrous Turkey. The response and the display have also kept me thinking about beer at Thanksgiving. If you're interested in the response from Garret and the Brooklyn Brewery pairings, stop by the store and check things out. However, this article will deal with a different range of beers.

I think the hardest thing about pairing beer with a holiday meal is that people want one beer to pair with everything. While I think there are beers that might do an okay job at such a blanket pairing, I don't think you're doing your food or your beer justice by expecting this. Instead, I'd recommend breaking the meal up into sections and offering beer to go along with each.



To start, things never go as planned around the holidays. Guests show up early, appliances don't cooperate and there just isn't enough oven or stove top space for all of that food. I'm a firm believer in serving a little beer as guests arrive. A small glass of dry, slightly strong and mildly bitter beer will help to stimulate appetites, give your guests something to occupy themselves and act as a social lubricant for those relatives that you only see once a year. A nice Belgian strong golden ale offers all of these qualities and much more. Fruity, spicy yeast and mild noble hop character will have your guests licking their lips at more than just the smell of the turkey. Biere de Champagne, an off-shoot of the strong golden style, has a much drier, Champagne-like quality derived from extended aging. Named for the methods used to produce the beer and the similarities to the production of Champagne, Biere de Champagne also makes for a great conversation starter.

Break out the snacks and finger foods once most of the guests have arrived and the work in the kitchen is winding down. Whether you go simple with party trays of cheese, meat and veggies or get adventurous with spinach and artichoke dip and crab cakes, make sure you have a selection of beers to go along. I'm a huge fan of the way the caramel malts and herbal hops of an American Pale Ale pair with a nice sharp Cheddar. Blue cheese is always a must for me and a nice citrusy American IPA always seems to be a nice foil for the rich, creamy cheese and its accompanying tangy bite. I've introduced my girlfriend to the wonders of a gooey, earthy Camembert and doubt I'd be forgiven if there wasn't one in attendance. For earthier cheeses like the Camembert I like a good brown ale for its light sweetness, earthy quality and interesting roast to keep the "mushroomy" flavors in check. The aforementioned Spinach and Artichoke dip would also do well with an American pale ale.

When the main event comes around, everyone should be loosened up and ready for some serious feasting. If your spread is anything like my family's, then you've got a dozen or more dishes out across the table with a variety of foods. I wouldn't recommend fussing with more than one beer for the dinner. Try pairing the beer with your centerpiece item, like that six foot roasted turkey I've been staring at. The dark fruit and bittersweet chocolate flavors of a good Belgian dubbel will embrace your turkey like a good sauce. The earthy, herbaceous flavors of stuffing and green bean casserole will welcome the traditional heirloom hop varieties present in a dubbel. The one bit of advice Garret Oliver gave me on this sort of pairing was, "watch out for the cranberry sauce". I'm not big on the stuff, but if you are, heed the man's warning. Another option for holiday roast bird is the always versatile saison. Another Belgian style, saison is known for its dry palate, floral hop bouquet and subtle spice notes. Echoing the herb flavors typical of Thanksgiving turkey and stuffing, saison counteracts the dense nature of casseroles and cream sauces with active carbonation and prepares you for your next bite.

The best part of any holiday meal, and the one thing I always look forward to, is dessert. I grew up on my mom's pecan pie and would have nothing else, until I discovered Bourbon Chocolate Pecan pie. This stuff should be illegal! As if pecan pie wasn't cavity inducing and rich enough, some other-worldly cook decided to add chocolate and booze. I make my own at home using a recipe my parents got from a Cajun restaurant in Alaska, but you can find a delicious rendition made fresh by the deli at the midtown store when you come check out the giant turkey. I have discovered though, that I can't eat such a rich dessert without cutting it with something. Usually this is where a cup of coffee comes into the picture, and it still might, but beer can do just as well. A good Imperial stout has enough roasted coffee bitterness to foil the richest slice of pie and still add its own set of flavors. Dessert is the perfect time to serve those fruit-filled lambics that are usually too sweet on their own. A slice of cheesecake and a glass of Framboise would be a perfect end to the meal. Pumpkin pie and a nice barleywine might make me reconsider my aversion for holiday spices. The buttery crust and less than sweet filling will pair well with the lightly sweet, rum-soaked fruit and caramel flavors of the beer. Adding a dollop of whipped cream to your slice of pie won't phase the barleywine.

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I hope some of these suggestions help you to decide on what to offer at your next holiday get together. Whatever you decide to do, have a safe holiday and enjoy it all in moderation...especially the family.

My Holiday Beer List:

Aperitif –

Westmalle Tripel

A Tripel is a specific style of strong golden originated by the brewing monks of Westmalle. Lots of tropical/stone fruit character from the yeast in this one, a bit of honeyed sweetness and nice dry, lightly hoppy finish. A true classic and ideal party starter.



Appertizers –

Flying Dog Old Scratch Amber Lager

A personal favorite, Old Scratch is a domestic spin on a classic German amber lager. In the same vein as Samuel Adams Boston Lager and Brooklyn Lager, you can expect a nice hoppy beer full of citrusy herbal goodness. The hops are kept in check by a healthy dose of toasty malt in a crisp medium body. I can never get enough of this beer.



Real Ale Coffee Porter

I've got to support my local brewers and this coffee-infused porter is the perfect way to do it. Reminiscent of a brown ale with a heavier focus on roasted flavors, Real Ale Coffee Porter is surprisingly approachable. I've had people come into the store and tell me how much they love this beer, even though they don't like dark beers.



Main Course –

Ommegang Three Philosophers

A Belgian-style strong dark ale out of Cooperstown, New York. This beer has all of the qualities of a good Dubbel but more of them. Add the fact that there's a small portion of sour cherry beer in the mix and you have an ideal partner for your turkey, even if it is six foot wide. A bit of sweetness and roasted flavors resembling good chocolate mix with a hint of acidity and dark fruit from the yeast.



Dessert –

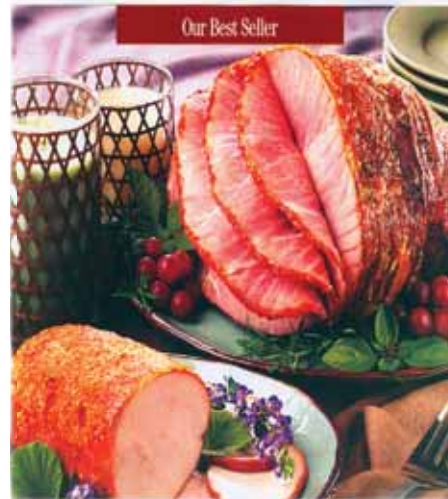
North Coast Old Rasputin Russian Imperial Stout

My cup of coffee. Old Rasputin is known for its big flavor, huge roast profile and bitter finish. It is the quintessential imperial stout. Bitter chocolate and coffee malt flavors team up with heavy doses of hops and alcohol to create the perfect end to a long holiday meal. I'm ready for this beer and a slice of that delicious pecan pie. ☺



Please email us at
justincody@specsonline.com
with feedback.

HONEY HAMS for the HOLIDAY



If you were fortunate enough to be at our Spec's Smith Street Superstore last year when we were sampling our fresh Honey Hams, you'll know what I'm writing about. Sam the Ham Man (what we affectionately call him) started his Honey Glazed Ham & Deli down in McAllan, Texas, a little over 10 years ago. It was there they perfected the art of the honey ham by not only glazing the outside but flavoring the entire ham, slice by slice.

You're in luck this year! You will again be able to sample, and order the hams, now at more Spec's locations:

Houston Smith St. Superstore

Friday November 20th 4-8pm

Saturday November 21st 10am-2pm

Pick up your pre-ordered hams on
Tuesday, Nov 24 through Wednesday Nov 25
at the store at the store you ordered from.

OR, EASY ORDERING:
Call in to one of the above
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