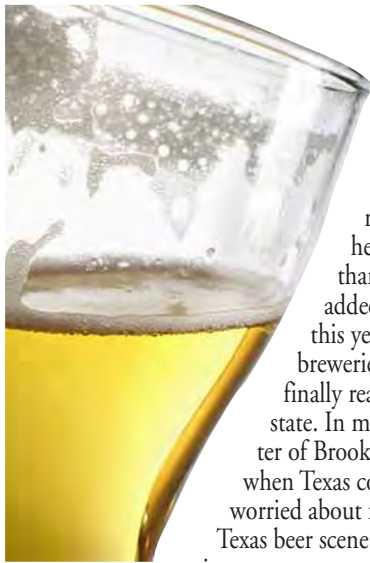


BEER BUZZ

2009: A Beer in Review

by Joey Williams



What a year it has been. What a year it has been in general, but for beer in particular. 2009, like 2008 before it, was a year of explosive growth for selection and awareness in Texas. We added over 120 beers to our selection that had never before been sold in Texas. Some of those were limited releases, but many of those beers are here to stay. Many of those new beers are thanks to the dozens of breweries that have added Texas to their distribution territory this year. A lot of this growth is from breweries that were already available in Texas finally realizing the demand in the Lone Star state. In my meeting with Garret Oliver, brewmaster of Brooklyn Brewery, he mentioned his surprise when Texas consumed so much of his beer that he worried about filling orders in his home market. The Texas beer scene is coming into its own and the word is out.

Like I mentioned, this year has been one of explosive growth and we saw beers available on retail shelves that I never thought I would see here. Early on I knew that this year was going to be amazing, especially when we received Lagunitas Hop Stoopid for the first time at the store. This is a beer that has been talked about since its release, but up until now was only available in California and some surrounding areas. Since the day we received our first shipment of Hop Stoopid it has been a best seller, and for good reason, the beer is absolutely delicious.

The list of beers we'd all heard about but could only dream of getting was shortened even further when New Belgium added their Lips of Faith line of beers to Texas' portfolio. Beers like Le Fleur, Misseur?, Transatlantique Kriek and the legendary La Folie are now only a short car ride away. When I got the news that we'd see these beauties, I didn't believe it. No matter the list of beers we'd already seen this year, having La Folie available at all, let alone year round, on the store shelves in Spec's was unimaginable. Even today, when we have the beers on the shelf, I still look to make sure they're really there, and occasionally I take one home to check authenticity.

None of these new additions could compare to the arrival of Interlude from Allagash. A very unassuming beer in a very unassuming Belgian-style bottle with a simple cream colored label. The price is the only thing that would lead anyone to believe this beer is as special as it is and even then it's not that extravagant by Allagash standards. Interlude is a beer that I've wanted to try since I'd gotten into beer. On many occasions I'd logged onto the internet and visited sites for online retailers where I could order it and have it shipped for outrageous sums of money,



and I would have paid them. For whatever reason, I didn't. And now we have it, that beautiful Brett-filled, double barrel blend of goodness concocted by the brewing alchemists at Allagash to pleasure my taste buds and delight my senses. When this beer was delivered, a box tore and deposited two bottles violently on the cement floors on our loading dock and sprayed glass and beer everywhere and it was a highlight of my work day. The smell was unbelievable. I could have lived on that loading dock from that point on, even with the ridiculous cold we've been having.

Talking about beers we've received from breweries already in Texas, no matter how epic they are, is nothing compared to the arrival of the last brewery I thought we'd ever likely see in Texas. If you've spent any time on internet websites discussing beer, then you've heard of Mikkeller, the nomad brewer without a brewery. Hearing that we might be seeing beers from such a small operation was something I'd wait to see before I believed it. Midyear we did see beer from the award winning brewer arrive and like Hop Stoopid earlier in the year, Mikkeller quickly sold out. Monks' Brew and It's Alive! quickly became two of the best selling craft imports in our selection and remain there to this day.

All of the buzz wasn't just about the breweries outside of Texas making their presence known inside of our borders. A healthy dose of news was plastered across the front page of the Houston Chronicle on



the morning of Divine Reserve 8's release. Thanks to the great press coverage, the release of any Divine Reserve from now on will be affected. The impact was felt immediately as number 8 sold out in record times across the city of Houston. In previous releases we'd see a small handful of dedicated fans waiting outside our doors before we opened at 10 o'clock. The initial wave of customers would get a good portion of the beer, at our standard two 6-packs per person limit, and the remaining stock would be plucked on by stragglers all the way up until lunch time. With the release of Divine 8, we sold out in a record 24 minutes and we were shocked. When we opened the doors for business at ten we allowed in over one hundred customers that were there solely for the new Saint Arnold's release.

With the release of Divine 9 earlier this month we set a new record. The same number of cases that we received for the previous release was gone in less than half the time. A line of over 150 people, that had begun lining up hours before we opened, tore through our stock in a record 11 minutes. For anyone that thought the release of Divine 8 was a fluke and caused only by the Chronicle article, think again. The Chronicle brought the release to everyone's attention, but the brewery's dedication to pushing themselves more and more with each release and their ever-growing fan base will continue to set records for sell outs. Break out the tents and the lawn chairs, you've been warned.

2009 was a year filled with highlights and milestones. There are countless arrivals that I didn't have the space to write about and many more that have slipped my mind. Things have changed for Texas, the pendulum has swung in the other direction and we are no longer viewed as a state full of "good ol' boys" happy to drink only factory born yellow fizzy beer. Brewers from all over the world have realized the untapped potential that is the Lone Star State. Brewers within our own borders continue to grow and produce beers of a quality we could only hope for in years past. It has been an amazing time for beer in Texas and I've got a bit of news for all of you, 2010 is looking even more amazing. Drink up!

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2009: A Beer in Review

BEER BUZZ: MY TOP 5 OF 2009

by Joey Williams

I toyed with the idea of compiling a list of my top handful of beers release for the first time in Texas in 2009. I looked back over as much of the year as I could remember, because my memory is terrible. I've racked my brain, bugged my friends and come up with a list that I'm happy with. Enjoy!

1. ALLAGASH INTERLUDE

Like I've said countless times, this beer is my "white whale". I have wanted to try Interlude since the beginning of my journey into craft beer. The beer is fermented with two yeast strains, one of which is their proprietary strain of *Brettanomyces* that lends an earthy funkiness and fruity complexity. The beer is then aged, half in French Merlot and half in French Syrah barrels, before being blended and bottle conditioned. The result of the labor intensive process is beer with incredible depth and character that never let me down. Easily my top choice.



2. NEW BELGIUM LA FOLIE

If any beer had a chance to overtake Interlude for my top spot, NB's La Folie was it. I love sour beers and while they're not for everyone, this one might be. I took a bottle over to share with my girlfriend's family and her mom, a devout wine drinker, was in love with La Folie. The beer displays incredible fruit and an acidic bite that is much milder than other sours. Where other sours are heavily acetic and tasting of vinegar, La Folie boasts a soft lemon acidity and under ripe raspberry tartness. The wood is subtle and works well with the very dry finish.



3. FLYING DOG GONZO

2009 GABF Gold Medal winner for Imperial Stout, Gonzo is a beer worthy of the title and my number three spot. I'm drinking a Gonzo as I type this and the roasted malt, hop bite and strong alcohol character are keeping the words flowing.



4. LAGUNITAS HOP STOOPID

Hop Stoopid was not the beer that converted me from a devout malt man, but it's the IPA that sealed the deal. Aggressive and hoppy while maintaining an unbelievable level of drinkability, Hop Stoopid is what other "imperial" IPAs aspire to be.

5. LEFT HAND FADE TO BLACK

Left Hand is a brewery I could never talk enough about. I think they are one of the most underrated breweries on shelves in Texas. Fade to Black has opened many people's eyes to what sort of quality beers come out of the little Longmont, Colorado brewery. The first in a series of dark beers, this 8.5% Export Stout is all you could want to keep you warm and satisfied this winter, in a glass that is.



If you have your own "Top 5 of 2009", e-mail me a copy at:

jwilliams@specsonline.com,

I'm interested to see what everyone was enjoying during such an epic year. ☺

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Beer in a Box
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