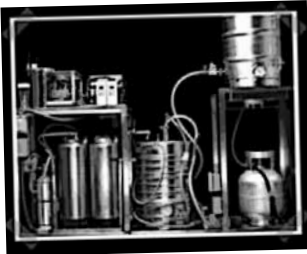


# BEER BUZZ

## The Brewer's Art

by Joey Williams



Beer is an incredibly creative and interesting beverage where a brewer can express their creativity for you to enjoy in a glass. Can the same thing be said of wine? Not to take anything away from fermented grapes, but wine is almost exclusively a product of agriculture and the earth. The human interaction and creativity expressed in wine is such a small part of the equation. That

isn't to say that wine isn't enjoyable, but it does explain why I have little interest in the stuff.

The human interaction is what "revs my engine" when it comes to beer. The ability of a person to take raw ingredients and cook them, through some act of alchemy, into something almost entirely different is awe-inspiring. Think about it, have you ever eaten bread or cereal and thought, this tastes like beer? That's the brewer's art, taking simple ingredients, like barley malt, to unimaginable heights. The artistry of the brewers over at Allagash, in particular, has made a lasting impression on myself and the entire craft beer community.

Allagash produces world class Belgian-style ales influenced by the American craft beer movement. The awards and accolades that the brewery has received in their decade and a half of existence would never suggest its humble beginnings. Allagash was founded by Rob Todd in 1995 to produce the style of beer that Rob felt was missing in America. The brewery started as a one man operation in a small building on the outskirts of Portland, Maine. Such humble beginnings did not prevent Todd from creating some of the most sought after beers in the Northeast. From nothing but a man's creativity and drive a brewery grew and began to command attention.

The brewery was a regional treasure for many years producing a lineup of beers including Allagash White, Dubbel and Tripel Reserve and Four, an incredibly strong beer that undergoes four separate fermentations. It wasn't long before word spread and the brewery outgrew its old building on the outskirts of Portland. In 2007, Rob Todd and his crew moved their production into a new facility and decided to commemorate the occasion with a beer. Fluxus was the first beer to be brewed in the new brewhouse and was to be a symbol of the innovation and originality that would continue to come from the minds of the brewers. The beer has changed each year since, released as an anniversary of new beginnings and a sign of the breweries success. The 2007 edition included a large portion of Rye malt and was bittered with the yarrow root, a herbal ingredient used for bittering in a time that predated hops. Last years release was a Double White spiced with ginger. This years edition has me more than intrigued, a Saison brewed with black pepper and sweet potatoes. I have an unhealthy obsession with the smell of black pepper, so when I read that was part of the ingredients, I was excited. The fact that sweet potatoes are the next ingredient had me a little worried. The sweet potatoes are added in the mash where the enzymes in barley convert the starches to sugars, much the same way that pumpkin is used. Considerable body is contributed by the addition of the sweet potatoes.

Allagash continued to defy preconception in their new brewery when they did what many people said could not be done. In 2008, they became the first American brewery to produce a beer in the authentic old world process of Lambic beer. Many said this would never happen because Lambic is produced in a valley outside of Brussels with particular airborne bacteria and conditions that lend themselves to the production of this esoteric style of beer. The beer was brewed and then allowed to cool overnight in a shallow vessel exposed to the air. This exposure results in a "spontaneous" fermentation brought on by airborne bacteria infecting the cooling liquid. During this process Allagash also discovered a new strain of *Brettanomyces* floating around that was exclusive to their part of the world. *Brettanomyces* is that "wild" yeast that creates such polarizing flavors and aromas in beer and gives Lambic some of its distinctive character. The Lambic-style beer is aging in French oak barrels until the brewery decides how they're going to release it (we'll let you know what it is available). In the meantime, you can taste some of the art that is Allagash Brewing along with their newfound proprietary strain of Brett in their beer Interlude. Interlude is the brewery's crowning glory and part of their experimental Serie d'Origine. A traditional farmhouse strain of yeast is used in conjunction with their house strain of *Brettanomyces* to create the core stone fruit and bread flavors of the beer. Portions of the beer are then aged in French Merlot and Syrah barrels before being masterfully blended to create an absolute masterpiece.

More brewing wizardry is executed in their Barrel-Aged Beers, a series of Belgian-style beers combined with the American infatuation with the flavors of the barrel.

Curieux, a traditional Abbey-style Tripel, spends months in Jim Beam bourbon barrels to acquire flavors of vanilla, toasted coconut and delicious bourbon to add to its already impressive tropical fruit character. The resulting combination of new and existing flavors is one that has kept me coming back time and again for years. Odyssey is a new addition to the retail shelves in Texas and the third installment in the series. A 10% dark wheat beer, a portion of Odyssey spends months in new medium toast American oak barrels before being blended with the remainder of the beer that spent its time in stainless steel tanks. The final blend is incredibly complex with dark fruit, molasses, clove and tobacco making their presence known. There is a finesse about the way Allagash executes their barrel-aging that sets them apart from other breweries. The barrel character in all of their Barrel-Aged Beers is part of the flavor rather than being the dominant flavor. A true testament to their technique is their restraint, a refreshing quality in American brewing today.

Barrel aging and wild yeast aren't the only places where the brewers showcase their talents. Victor and Victoria are a pair of beers that finally give the grape a new trick to perform. Victor uses several hundred pounds of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes to obtain its wine-like qualities, while Victoria uses Chardonnay grapes to get just the right combination of acidity and fruit character. Both beers utilize wine yeast and focus on the influence of the wine grapes on the rest of the beer. This is a place where grapes are finally something I can get excited about.

Rob Todd and the brewers at Allagash are not alone in their boundary-pushing creativity. The beer industry is full of artists that pick up the paint brushes of malt and hops each day to create unforgettable experiences. The artisanal brewers' ability to transform materials from the earth into something more has captivated man throughout history. They say civilization was created for the production of beer. We are not the first and won't be the last to be taken in by the process and the delicious results. ☺

