

BEER BUZZ:

LONE STAR BROWN ALE

by Joey Williams



No, the fine folks in control of Lone Star beer are not planning to roll out a new beer, as exciting as that might be for some of us. Instead, this is a tale of how the American Brown Ale style as it is known today has ties to both Texas and the city of Houston. Brown ales aren't always my favorites style, more often than not they are moderately dark beers with moderately dark flavors and not much else going on. An American Brown ale, however, is often dark enough to frighten some and flavorful enough to scare off the rest. I love a good American Brown ale and the story of how the style came about only served to further my love.

In the 1980s, when commercial brewers like Sierra Nevada were redefining beer styles and brewing with their decidedly "American" take on English styles, California homebrewers were performing similar transformations on the English Brown Ale. A trip to California by Scott Birdwell, owner of Defalco's Home Wine and Beer Supplies in Houston, brought the newly created "style" to the attention of local Houston homebrew club, the Foam Rangers. Apparently, beers brewed in this fashion were doing very well at local California homebrew competitions, but were getting shunned at the national level for not conforming to the accepted "brown ale" style, so the Foam Rangers made the decision to include "California Dark" as a category for entry in their annual Dixie Cup homebrew competition. The turnout, despite not being overwhelming, was a success and the American Homebrewers' Association began acknowledging the style shortly after, but elected to rename the style as "Texas Brown Ale", despite it having originated in California. The rest, as seems to be the case in these sorts of stories, is history. The style gained popularity in competitions nationwide and the style eventually became known by the name it wears today, "American Brown Ale". It is interesting to note that Scott Birdwell of Defalco's, in an interview with a blog about the origins of American Brown, had this to say, "I consider "Texas Brown Ales" to be "extreme" American Brown Ales...but that may just be me". Even if that's just Mr. Birdwell's opinion at the moment, I wait impatiently for the day that I can purchase large quantities of Texas Brown ales.

As was the case with the American Pale Ale (APA), the American Brown Ale owes its origins to the English Brown ales. Also, like the APA, the American Brown differed, at first, by using domestic ingredients in the formulation of Brown ale recipes. Over time the quantities of both malt and hops grew and a bigger, bolder, more flavorful Brown ale was born. A good American Brown ale should have a healthy dose of malt flavor, which can include caramel, toast, bread, nuts, chocolate and coffee, in some more intense examples. The flavors differ from Porter or Stout in that there is less influence of darker malt flavors, darker chocolates and coffee, and a larger importance placed on the richness of caramel, toast and bread flavors. The rich malt flavors and accompanying sweetness, which shouldn't be overwhelming or unpleasant, is kept in balance by an equally large hop character from American hop varieties.

What all of this boils down to is that the American Brown ale is a style that owes its existence, in part, to the passion felt by the Houston beer community. In addition, it goes to show that, though the British had been brewing brown ales for possibly hundreds of years, it took American homebrewers to get the style right.

Bear Republic Pete's Tribute Brown

An American Brown ale from the motherland, California. Bear Republic delivers on all points and then some of the style. Brown sugar and molasses are used in the brewing process, as are a mass of Cascade and Centennial variety American hops. Big, rich and intense, Pete's Tribute is a favorite of mine in the style.



Independence Bootlegger Brown

I couldn't follow this article with a list of beers to try and not include a Texas born option, but the list is short for American Brown ales in Texas. Luckily, Independence Brewing of Austin, Texas brings us Bootlegger to enjoy. A great place to start with American Brown Ales, Bootlegger is well balanced and approachable.



Dogfish Head Palo Santo Marron

The beast of the bunch, Palo Santo Marron weighs in at a monstrous 12% ABV. Aged in a three-story tall, 10,000 gallon tank constructed from South American Palo Santo wood, prized for its aroma and flavor contribution, Palo Santo is rich, complex and indulgent. An unbelievable treat for fans of the style or the more extreme side of modern brewing, but surprisingly tame for a Dogfish Head beer, there were no fruits, vegetables or ancient people used in the brewing of this beer.



Rogue John John Hazelnut

Rogue's award winning Hazelnut Brown Nectar spends a little time in Rogue's Hazelnut Spiced Rum barrels to give us John John Hazelnut, named for the fact that both brewer and distiller share the same first name. John John Hazelnut takes the rich, nearly dessert-like Hazelnut Brown Nectar and adds layers of spice, wood and alcohol sweetness. A great way to end a meal or a night, and surprisingly affordable considering the brewer and the barrel-aged nature. ☺



E-mail me: jwilliams@specsonline.com

NEW ON SHELVES AT SPEC'S DOWNTOWN:

Ommegang Cup O' Kyndnes 750ml
Witches' Brew 750ml
Rogue John John Hazelnut 22oz
Lagunitas Little Sumpin' Wild Ale 22oz
Timmerman's Framboise 11.2oz
Timmerman's Strawberry 11.2oz
Bourgogne des Flanders 4pk
Great Divide Rumble 6pk

