In the wake of this morning’s Saint Arnold Pumpkinator release, I found myself revisiting some thoughts I’ve had, and shared, a number of times since my return to Spec’s. Things have changed in the world of craft beer, especially in the way we get information to, and from, our guests. The response to that information is so much more noticeable now than it was years, or even months, ago. In order to better manage our ability to get you, our guest, what you are looking for, or an answer to why you can’t find it, we have had to take to the internet and social media. It’s no longer just phone calls and emails, it’s now a number of blogs, beer news websites, Facebook and Twitter that we participate in to best serve the community. This article is less about beer in particular, and more about a glimpse behind the curtain.

Even before I worked at the Smith Street location, years ago, I used the internet in order to find information on breweries, new and special releases, and even the opinions of like-minded beer drinkers on what I should try. There are a number of websites that offer this information and I’d like to share them with you, so that you might know what to look for, ask about, or have an idea what’s causing things in the beer world to happen the way they do.

The website I check more often than any other is BeerPulse (www.beerpulse.com) because they do a great job of compiling brewery specific information, like openings, closings, expansions and new releases, as well as the various political, environmental and industry news stories that impact the beer world at large. It’s much easier than signing up for every brewery’s email newsletter, in addition to the numerous industry publications on these topics. I get a good amount of information for myself and my department on this website, and a quick glance gives more than can be imagined.

A blog everyone reading this should immediately visit, bookmark and revisit on a regular basis is the Beer, TX blog on the Houston Chronicle’s website, operated by Ronnie Crocker, passionate local beer guy and author of “Houston Beer”. If it’s beer and it’s happening in Houston, Beer, TX (http://blog.chron.com/beerto) Ronnie has you covered. I check this blog a handful of times a week when at my desk, in between this project and that.

There are several internet beer communities that offer user reviews of beers, in addition to news, events and other perks, like interaction with brewery reps/employees. The two best known, and most popular, are BeerAdvocate (www.beeradvocate.com) and RateBeer (www.ratebeer.com). Both have their pros and cons, and both are very much like any other internet community…things can get ugly quick in their forums. But, as is generally the case, the majority of these communities are beer drinkers, like you and me, just looking to enjoy our next beer, occasionally in the form of fun events or bottle shares. I use BeerAdvocate when looking for beer information, like style or alcohol content, if not listed on the bottle or not readily available through normal channels. I used to use BeerAdvocate to update a small, very passionate and very vocal portion of our business on new product arrivals, etc. Today, this doesn’t reach our guests in a way that is both helpful and efficient.

The big game changers seem to have come in the form of Facebook and Twitter. These social media networks put drinkers in touch with each other, as well as brewers and brewery reps, in the blink of an eye. This means news travels immediately and the bottles that used to sit for days or weeks before now create lines of thirsty beer enthusiasts. This is now where you, our guest, are updated, at nearly a moments notice, on new arrivals. @Specs_Beer_Dept (https://twitter.com/Specs_Beer_Dept) is the account that updates our guests on all things beer across the state of Texas. The internet link is for those not currently using, or interested, in Twitter. You don’t have to be a user of Twitter to get access to the information. I do not operate the Spec’s Beer Department Twitter account, but it is used to communicate the happenings within my store by Justin Cody. The occasional check of that page should gain you all of the helpful information we have to offer about new items, upcoming special releases, expected new arrivals, events, happenings and more in the Spec’s beer family. In addition, there is a general Spec’s Twitter account used to notify our guests on ALL of the fun happenings and deals across our entire chain, @Specs1962 (https://twitter.com/Specs1962). I am, by no means, a social person, but I have been motivated to participate in Twitter by someone close to me, in addition to my job, and have found it to be entertaining and informative.

I have not given in to Facebook. However, it would seem that every brewery, bar or beer person, Spec’s included is participating in this circus. I recommend liking, following or stalking any number of such persons to stay informed on the happenings. I seem to miss out on a handful of things because of my lack of participation in this community. Things like Karbach’s bike ride events, Saint Arnold’s pub crawls or any number of other brewery events in the area. I have been fortunate to be informed of a bike ride or two before their occurrence, and I have participated, drank and ate with great Houston beer nerds.

As I type this, I feel sort of ridiculous. It is, after all, just beer. But much of our job is to inform you of what we have, what we are getting, what it is, where it is, how and when to obtain it. Because, even if it’s just beer, it is my job to make sure you know all that I can offer for your enjoyment of one of my favorite of life’s pleasures. This means utilizing all of these tools at our disposal to ensure that you are made aware and offered a chance to participate. This is all new for us and we continue to learn, grow and improve on serving you.

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Labyrinth Black Ale  
American Strong Dark Ale – 13.2% ABV  Uinta Brewing Company (Salt Lake City, Utah)  
So, this is one of those releases that would, and will, be handled via Twitter. Uinta is a brewery new to Texas as of the typing of this article. In fact, I don’t have product on the shelf yet, but I know it’s coming before you’ll read this. Labyrinth is a member of Uinta’s impressive “Crooked Line”, similar to Boulevard’s “Smokestack Series”. It is a series of beers that stand at the edge, or outside, of what many consider beer. Labyrinth could be considered a stout, but the brewery’s decision to avoid the title motivates me to do the same. The liquid spends a good amount of time in rye whiskey barrels before being bottled…year round! Year round or not, this will not always be an easy find, so get it if you see it!

Trinity Tripel  
Belgian-style Tripel – 9.0% ABV  Community Beer Company (Dallas, Texas)  
This is part of a wave of new additions that I just cannot stop talking about. I’ve gone as far as to say that someone at Community is stalking me, because they have successfully brewed a beer that I struggle to find fault in…apart from my lack of constant supply. Belgian Tripel is one of my favorite styles, nearly as much as Saison, but I usually feel American brewers miss many of the portions I like. Trinity is classically brewed, complete with effervescence, dryness and an appropriate amount of yeast character (fruit/spice). In addition, they have modernized it by hopping the beer with two new hop varietals, one of which is my current favorite, New Zealand’s Nelson Sauvin. Used in my beloved New Belgium Shift, Prairie ‘Merica and a handful of others, it brings loads of citrus, florals and herbal notes that line up well with the base style. I’ve revisited it a time or two and plan to continue until the small amount we have is sold out.

Belfort  
Belgian-style Strong Dark – 8.2% ABV  Rogness Brewing Company (Pflugerville, Texas)  
Like Biere de Garde, discussed in my last article, Belgian-style Strong Darks (Dubbels and Quadrupels included) seem to be gaining popularity with Texas craft breweries. There has been a recent wave of additions in this family and one of the ones that have gotten me interested is the entry from Rogness, for whom I’ve not had as much as I should have. The style varies from deep amber to black and all in between. Belfort seems to land on the lighter side. I, sadly, have not had it yet so I am in no place to tell you what to expect. But this is a prime opportunity for you to do the same in reverse. Try it and tell me, or any of those listed above, what you think!

Victory Red Thunder  
Baltic Porter – 8.5% ABV  Victory Brewing Company (Downington, Pennsylvania)  
I have never been the strongest proponent of wine barrel-aged beers, but this style, Baltic Porter, is one that has absolutely benefitted from this treatment. So, at its base, Red Thunder is Victory’s Baltic Thunder, a member of a “below the radar” style called Baltic Porter. Baltic Porter is not quite an Imperial Porter, nor is it a Stout. Historically, it was a beer brewed by Baltic brewers in response to the importation of English Stouts to the area. Because of a history of lager brewing, it was a strong dark (usually black) beer that balances a moderate level of roast with richer malt flavors, like those found in German Bock or Dunkel. This level of roast, as well as toasted, caramel flavors, are wonderfully accented by the dark fruit and toasted/charred flavors in the barrel. This I have had, and I will be revisiting it when I can as long as I can.

Abbaye de Saint Bon-Chien 2012  
Biere de Garde – 11.0% ABV  BFM (Brasserie des Franches-Montagnes) (Saignelegier, Switzerland)  
The rise in the popularity of sour beers has been as astounding to me as the impact of social media and the internet on how we do business. Years ago, I couldn’t get someone to stop and listen to why they should try something that sounds so foreign to what beer “is”. Now, I have people come ask, “Where are your sours?” In addition, people ask what’s new or exciting in that category. I am here to tell you, the arrival of the Abbey of Saint Good-Dog (named for the brewery’s late cat) is some of the biggest, most exciting news in months. The fact that it is indeed that good, paired with its birth in Switzerland, is astounding. Again, as mentioned in the last article on Biere de Garde, this is a historical representation that has soured, intentionally, and more resembles the sour browns of Belgium. It’s pricey, even for a sour, but it’s well worth it. I am beyond excited at all of the new additions to our selection, and this is top of the list.

Vixnu  
American-style Double/Imperial IPA – 9.3% ABV  Cervejaria Colorado (Ribeirao Preto, Brazil)  
Brewing isn’t all American and European and this addition from South America showcases that. Cervejaria Colorado produces a handful of beers in the American approach, three of which we see here in Houston, and Vixnu is where I would start. Brewed with Rapadura sugar, to lighten the body, increase the alcohol without making a beer too full or heavy for successive drinking, and then hopped with Galena, Cascade and Amarillo hops. The flavors are right in line with American IPAs and modern importation/transportation means we are seeing it before everything has gone south. I’ve had it a time or two and thoroughly enjoyed it. The Imperial Stout, Guanabara, is also delicious. I wasn’t big on Bertha, their Brown brewed with Brazil nuts (just “nuts” in Brazil?).