

BEER BUZZ:

SAISON, THE ORIGINAL LAWNMOWER BEER

by Joey Williams



There is a saying in the wine industry, “it takes a lot of beer to make good wine”, which speaks to the amount beer consumed by all of the winery staff after a long day of work. The same can be said of just about any industry. The fact of the matter is after a long, hard day of work, it’s just nice to have a beer or two and relax. Many beers owe their creation to this very truth, like the Saisons of Belgium.

In Wallonia, the Southern, French-speaking region of Belgium, the summers are too warm for brewing without refrigeration, so farmers had to brew their summer beers in the colder months and store them until Summer came. Like with many other beers, the farmers discovered that if they increased their hopping rates and alcohol, the beer would last during storage. These hearty, sustaining beers weren’t ideal for thirst quenching during work, so they were often cut with lower alcohol beers like lambic, which also increased the acidity and refreshing qualities. Workers were often provided liters of the beer a day to slake their thirst and energize their activity.

As time went on, the work on the farms diminished and so too did the consumption of Saison. With consumption dwindling, many farmhouse breweries closed down and the style was in risk of extinction. In the early 1990s, world renowned beer writer Michael Jackson said, “The integrity of several Belgian beer styles is in danger and some could vanish. Perhaps the most endangered is the Saison,” Things weren’t looking good for the workhorse of Wallonia.

The constant pursuit by American craft brewers for new or long forgotten beer styles brought the Saison into focus in recent years. Though Mr. Jackson is no longer with us, I believe he would be pleased with the revival that the style has experienced in the last decade. Saisons are beginning to pop up in the seasonal and year-round lineups of Belgian-style and mainstream breweries across the US.

A lot of the reason for saisons being popular with American brewers is their incredible diversity. Saison never started out as a set style, instead it was a beer brewed with whatever the farmers had on hand. In modern times, saisons can be hoppy, yeasty, fruity, citrusy, spicy, earthy and funky. A saison can stress on one of these aspects or combine many of them to become a refreshing and complex thirst quencher. Traditional use of pale malts, noble or English hops made for a simple, easy drinking beer and the house yeast contributed the depth and complexity. In the hands of American brewers, the use of American hops, various herbs and spices and wild yeasts create an even more diverse landscape.

Saison is one of the original “lawnmower” beers, to be consumed after a long day of hard work. Still today it is a beer that balances simple refreshment and complex enjoyment, a feat that very few beers can attain. In recent years we’ve seen an influx of new and innovative saisons from brewers from around the world and its only going to continue. Saison is a style so diverse that it’s easy to find at least one that you really enjoy, and I recommend you do just that.

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Saison Dupont

The classic example of the style, Saison Dupont is cited as many brewers’ inspiration for getting in to the style. Peppery, fruity yeast and herbal, grassy hops dominate with a dry pale malt backbone holding everything together. Saison Dupont is still brewed on the Dupont family farm by the grandson of the original Dupont. A true world class beer and the one that got me started with Saisons.



Great Divide Colette

An American take on the more classic examples of the style, brewed with barley, wheat, rice and four different yeast strains. Citrusy, floral, herbal and grassy complexities immediately show in this beer. A bit fuller in body with a light residual sweetness shows the American heritage and a bit of a departure from the dry, lighter bodied and lively Belgians.



Brooklyn Sorachi Ace

A new arrival and an exciting one, Brooklyn’s brewmaster fell in love with the hop varietal Sorachi Ace on a trip to Japan, where the hop was originally grown. Sorachi Ace is no longer grown in its birthplace on the isle of Japan, but one hop grower in Oregon is keeping the varietal alive. The saison was built around the hop varietal to accentuate the lemongrass, spice and woody character. Dry, hoppy and classic with a new world twist, Brooklyn continues to show their brewing chops in the Belgian beer world.

Allagash Fluxus ‘09

Allagash’s award winning anniversary beer is brewed with sweet potato and black pepper, two ingredients more suited to your dinner than your drink. The sweet potato lends a bright orange color and substantially fuller body to the beer without much flavor and the black pepper lends a perfume of spice. As Allagash always does, the traditional characteristics of a Belgian saison are augmented with American brewing to provide rich yeast character, hearty malt flavors and a balancing hop presence.



Boulevard Tank 7

A list of saisons wouldn’t be complete without my personal favorite. I fell in love with Tank 7 on a trip to the brewery where I got a chance to drink the beer directly out of their bright (conditioning) tanks. Tank 7 is the base beer for the much talked about Saison-Brett. Instead of being dosed with wild yeast, Tank 7 gets a healthy dry-hopping with American Amarillo hops. Citrusy, spicy and grassy hop character mingles with fruity yeast and dry cracker-like malt to create a saison that is not traditional, but so good.



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NEW ON SHELVES AT SPEC’S DOWNTOWN:

Brooklyn Sorachi Ace 750ml
De Proef Witte Noire 750ml
Lagunitas Lucky 13 22oz
Stone Cali-Belgique Belgian IPA 22oz
Great Divide 16th Anniversary
Wood-aged Double IPA 22oz
Great Divide Colette Farmhouse Ale 6pk
Leinenkugel Summer Shandy 12pk cans

