

BEER BUZZ:

2010: A BEER IN REVIEW

by Joey Williams



2010 was not a year of explosive growth like 2009 before it, but growth continues to be a trend in Texas. This year we saw a local brewery step onto a national stage with the opening of a “newery”, we saw current locals beef up their lineups and we await the arrival of many new breweries on store shelves and bar draft lists.

2010 isn't as impressive in terms of new arrivals or new breweries, but the ones that did arrive are well worth it. 2010 is, hopefully, the beginning of a richer beer scene for old and new breweries alike.

The biggest local news this year was the moving of Saint Arnolds brewing operations into their new location on Lyons Avenue here in Houston. The transition was better than could have been expected, with few outages and issues from a retail standpoint, and the new capacity allowed Saint Arnolds to release more of their Divine Reserve this year than ever before. Divine Reserve 10, an English Barleywine and the brewery's third barleywine in the series, wasn't just the largest batch of Divine to be released, it was also the most sought after. Arriving at the downtown location the morning of November 2nd brought news of two individuals that had been camped out at our doors since 2am that morning. The couple behind that duo in line had arrived before 6am and those that followed in line started at 7am and progressed on until the doors opened. The rain and election day kept the crowd down to the die hards, but everyone in the line that extended down the front of the Smith street location got beer. An impressive 15 minutes elapsed before the last of our allocation was purchased. Like I said in last years article, “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.” Even with the expansion in production, getting much of the next DR release will be a challenge.

Not all news in Texas brewing was good this year. The cold winter and storms that we had to start the year resulted in a roof collapse at Dallas-Fort Worth's Rahr & Sons brewery. The collapse caused extensive damage to the brewery's bottling line and took months to repair, replace and rebuild. We are now seeing Rahr back on store shelves, accompanied by new packaging, a switch from screw cap to pry-off bottles and the first ever release of their coveted Whiskey Barrel-aged Winter Warmer in 22-ounce bottles.

Austin's best-kept secret, Independence Brewing, is stepping into their own with the addition of Stash IPA and Convict Hill Oatmeal Stout. The brewery wasn't winning many fans with their solid, but safe, year-round lineup until the addition of these two beers. The brewery has also added a rotating lineup of draft offerings that have included a Mandarin Saison and a Braggot, a style of beer that is half mead and half beer. This recent turn has brought Independence some much needed recognition and makes them another exciting brewery to watch.

Mention of growth in Texas could not be complete without commenting on all of the new breweries recently opened or slated to open in the region over the coming months. Jester King outside of Austin has made huge waves in the online community and beer scene with their unique offerings. Commercial Suicide, a 3.3% ABV English Mild partially aged in fresh charred American oak barrels, is an absolute favorite. The fact that these guys packed that much flavor into a half strength brown ale is impressive and intriguing. Jester King calls itself a farmhouse brewery, so I look forward to Boxer's Revenge, their Saison/Farmhouse ale, to see what they're really capable of.

Mention of growth in Texas could not be complete without commenting on all of the new breweries recently opened or slated to open in the region over the coming months. Jester King outside of Austin has made huge waves in the online community and beer scene with their unique offerings.

Commercial Suicide, a 3.3% ABV English Mild partially aged in fresh charred American oak barrels, is an absolute favorite. The fact that these guys packed that much flavor into a half strength brown ale is impressive and intriguing. Jester King calls itself a farmhouse brewery, so I look forward to Boxer's Revenge, their Saison/Farmhouse ale, to see what they're really capable of.

Ranger Creek in San Antonio is another newcomer making waves in bars and blogs. Billing themselves as a “brewstillery”, Ranger Creek is a brewery that will be kicking out handcrafted spirits when the time is right and the barrels are ready to relinquish their contents. Until that time, we have beers like Oatmeal Pale Ale, Mesquite Smoked Porter and La Bestia Aimable, a Belgian-style strong dark ale, to satisfy our thirst. I got a chance to try all of these beers on draft at a local bar and impatiently await the arrival of the smoked porter and La Bestia in bottles. These guys are going to do amazing things if their starting lineup is any sign.

There are a handful more breweries looking to open in the coming months, No Label Brewing in Katy, Thirsty Planet in Austin and maybe a half dozen more are slated to open. This year and the next will be an amazing time in Texas. The camaraderie and competition should make for great drinking and good community. Like I said, it's not explosive growth, but it is exciting growth.

The rest of the country hasn't forgotten Texas; we still saw a tremendous amount of expansion in the state from breweries outside our state lines. The numbers aren't as impressive as last year, but we still saw more than half the amount of first time arrivals and a small number of new breweries on our shelves. Texas continues to be a place for breweries to prop up sales during a lagging economic time. We continue to hear about how thirsty Texans are drinking the rest of the country's beer and breweries are struggling to keep up. It's a good problem to have and one that I am happy to be a part of, and so should you.

A few landmark moments were achieved this year. The top of the list the 30th Anniversary for Sierra Nevada, a brewery that helped to inspire homebrewers, beer enthusiasts and much of the country into pursuing better beer. Sierra Nevada celebrated their landmark anniversary with a series of beer collaborations with industry pioneers like Fritz Maytag, of Anchor Brewing, and Charlie Papazian, current President of the Brewers' Association and author of “The Complete Joy of Homebrewing” along with several others. The series culminated recently with the release of Grand Cru, a blend of bourbon barrel-aged Bigfoot barleywine, Celebration and Pale Ale. I believe this is the first time that barrel-aged Bigfoot has been bottled ever. The response to such an occasion, and the monumental anniversary, has been enormous.

As these things usually go, the highs must be matched with lows to maintain an equilibrium. Anchor Brewing, of San Francisco, the brewery spearheaded by Fritz Maytag for so many decades and cited by many as their inspiration to venture off into their own brewing journeys, including Ken Grossman of Sierra Nevada, was sold. In an interview, Maytag stated that he'd been looking for a buyer for many years but hadn't found a deal that was to his liking. In the middle of 2010, Maytag found a deal that was to his liking with the Griffin Group. The holdings company is headed by individuals who helped to establish Skyy Vodka, understand the industry and have the backing of Fritz Maytag. While the news didn't sit well with me at first, the fact that Maytag signed off on the deal and will stay on as a high ranking figure brings me a bit more peace, which I'm sure eases their nerves a bit.



continues on page 2

Trends this year continued along the same road they have in years leading to this point, hops and the blending of American and European brewing. The Black "IPA" made a big splash this year, sparking more of a debate over what to call the new style than whether it's a style or not. These hopped up porters pair the roasted flavors and medium-full bodied character of a good robust porter with the hop flavor, aroma and bitterness of an IPA. The style was popular enough to be recognized by several of the major judging bodies in the beer community.

The blending of American and Belgian brewing traditions was a trend that had me all sorts of excited this year. American hops in Belgian-style Saisons and Tripels were a subject of constant desire. American Imperial Stouts fermented with fruity, spicy Belgian yeast had me foaming at the mouth. The possibilities that come from combining these two polar opposites are something that sets my mind and my mouth wandering, and a trend that I hope continues for years to come.

A final note, and one that has the possibilities of becoming the biggest story for the craft brewing industry in years is the "Brewmasters" TV show on Discovery Channel. The show follows Sam Calagione, charismatic and loveable founder of Dogfish Head Craft Brewery in his journey to create "off centered ales for off centered people." The show seems to get better with each episode, but hasn't received rave reviews. Many applaud the idea but question the brewery, or the brewer. I can't imagine a more suitable brewery or brewer for the job. I'm hoping the show continues, grows and opens many peoples' eyes to the world of beer as it is intended, brewed with chewed corn and surfboard shavings.

2010 was a tame ride in comparison to the hurricane that was 2009, but I can't help but feel it's a local calm before the storm. I believe, whole heartedly, that we are finally stepping into our own as a beer community, both as a haven for out of state brewers and locals. As a beer drinker, search out these new local start up breweries and sample their beers, drink what you like as much as you can and show that Texas can support the kind of beer community we've always heard about. Until then, continue drinking whatever is in front of you. Thank you for everything, sincerely, and we'll see you at Spec's next year!

2010: MY TOP 5 OF 2010

1. BOULEVARD TANK 7 FARMHOUSE ALE

I was first introduced to this beer on a trip to the brewery early on in 2010. After having the brewery's new Pilsner before lunch, I had my first Tank 7. After that beer I can probably count on one hand the number of other beers that I had on my trip. I continued to return to this beer time and time again throughout the year. The idea of a Belgian-style Saison, a favorite style of mine, accented with American hop varietals is something that many breweries around the country have begun to experiment with, including some breweries that brew exclusively this style of American Saison. I love the citrus and floral hop aromas paired with the fruity, spicy saison yeast and dry grain flavors and look forward to every interpretation of this new style that I can find.



2. LEFT HAND FADE TO BLACK VOL. 2 - SMOKED PORTER

Smoked beers are an acquired taste and one that I acquired in an odd progression involving a pint of Southern Star Rauchbier and a car ride. That story is for another time, but my love of smoked beers is for now and every time forward. Fade to Black Smoked Porter is a late arrival to the party, but stands as a marker for all of the other amazing examples of this style that are available, or will be available in Texas, like Southern Star's ProAm Smoked Porter and Ranger Creek's Mesquite Smoked Porter. Some have a smoked meat quality, but Fade to Black pairs burning wood against bruleed sugar and bitter chocolate. I love the combination. I bought a full case the moment we received our allotment downtown and drank several while writing this article, can you tell?



3. HARPOON LEVIATHAN TRITICUS WHEATWINE-STYLE ALE

Triticus has come and gone, but the impression is still fresh in my mind. The story of this beer goes back years and involves the two founding brothers of BeerAdvocate.com. The Alstrom brothers paired up with Harpoon for their 100 Barrel Series in creating a beer in a fledgling style, Wheatwine. Based upon the idea of a barleywine, but incorporating a large portion of wheat, malted or not, wheatwine is confined only by the brewers' creativity. Triticus is a dark wheatwine with rich dark fruit flavors, a healthy dosing of booze and vinous flavors that make it a perfect nightcap. We still talk about this beer downtown and wait for its release again in 2011, if that happens.



4. WIDMER W'10 PITCH BLACK IPA

Widmer is a brewery I never associated with memorable craft beer. They are a long time member of the community, but nothing they did had excited me until this year. The W series is the brewery's annual series where the brewers get to step outside the boundaries of their regular lineup to create something extraordinary. Many of the W series have been so successful that they've been re-released as year-round offerings, like Drifter Pale Ale. That's the case with Pitch Black IPA, a member of new Black "IPA" category and recent addition to the Widmer lineup. Pitch Black perfectly combined everything I loved about a porter, the roast and the drinkability, with everything that I love about an IPA. Thankfully Widmer will be bringing this treasure back in a rotating series of IPAs in 2011. Look out for the return!



5. REAL ALE DEVIL'S BACKBONE

Not quite hometown heroes, but Real Ale is a champion of the region and their recent move to bottle their seasonals has won them many new fans. Devil's Backbone, an American take on a Belgian-style Tripel, is an incredibly dangerous, very drinkable 8.5% ABV strong golden ale that leads to many interesting mornings in the beer department. It could easily be seen who'd visited with the devil a bit too much the night before when surveying the faces of beer department personnel, visiting vendors and customers. This devil is an equal opportunity destroyer. I recommend drinking with a high level of respect, but imagine I'll be drinking, once again, with reckless abandon when this beer hits shelves again. ☺



NEW ON SHELVES AT SPEC'S DOWNTOWN:

- New Belgium Lips of Faith Vrienden
Collabeeration w/ Allagash 22oz
- Boulevard Bourbon Barrel Quad 750ml
- Boulevard Dark Truth Stout 4pk
- Boulevard Tank 7 4pk
- Boulevard Double Wide IPA 4pk
- Boulevard Amber Ale 6pk
- Boulevard Boule Porter 6pk
- Rahr & Sons Whiskey Barrel-aged
Winter Warmer 22oz

