

THE BEER SCENE IN WINE COUNTRY

PART TWO

 ANDERS KISSMEYER, TECHNICAL EDITOR, E-MAIL: ANDERS@KISSMEYER.DK

The following article is the last of two by our technical editor, Anders Kissmeyer, who received the Danish Brewers' Guild's travel grant for 2011 to cover a trip including both the Craft Brewers Conference in San Francisco (covered by an article in the previous issue of the SBR), as well as participating in the event 'Sour Beer and Barrel Ageing Symposium' at the Russian River Brewing Co. in Santa Rosa. Finally, the trip involved visits to a few of the interesting breweries in this area, covered in both the first and this article.

In their invitation to the Sour Beer and Barrel Ageing Symposium on Tuesday, 22 March, the hosts Natalie and Vinnie Cilurzo, owners and founders of the Russian River Brewing Company, had called it a 'A sour and barrel aged beer extravaganza', and I have to say that this, if anything, was a clear understatement! The attendance, which was strictly limited to professional brewers of these types of beer, had been limited to 250 people (!), causing a lot of interested people to be either very sorry and disappointed or simply to crash the party, so every guest had to identify themselves upon their entrance.

The number of people attending the symposium had made Natalie and Vinnie go back on their original plan on making the symposium a formal and professional event with presentations, panels and discussions on the topic of sour beers and barrel ageing. Instead, and maybe also in the light of the fact that most of the attendees would be spending the next three full days at such seminars and panels at the CBC in San Francisco, they had decided to turn the symposium into a big party! Or maybe their own word 'extravaganza' is more suitable than party, for in its wonderful simplicity but

still overwhelming magnitude, the event consisted in a line-up of the several hundred different beers and a number of tables with gorgeous food prepared by Shawn Paxton, one of the most prominent beer chefs and beer and food matching experts in the US. Everything was set up along all open areas in the brewery itself plus in an adjacent party tent, allowing enough space for people to wander around helping themselves to the liquid and solid delicacies. While admiring the view to the beautiful, new and shiny 60 HL brewery, we could easily mingle, talk and munch at the same time without too much trouble or congestion. So, no wonder that the atmosphere at Russian River Brewing Co. on that Tuesday afternoon quickly rose to euphoric levels.

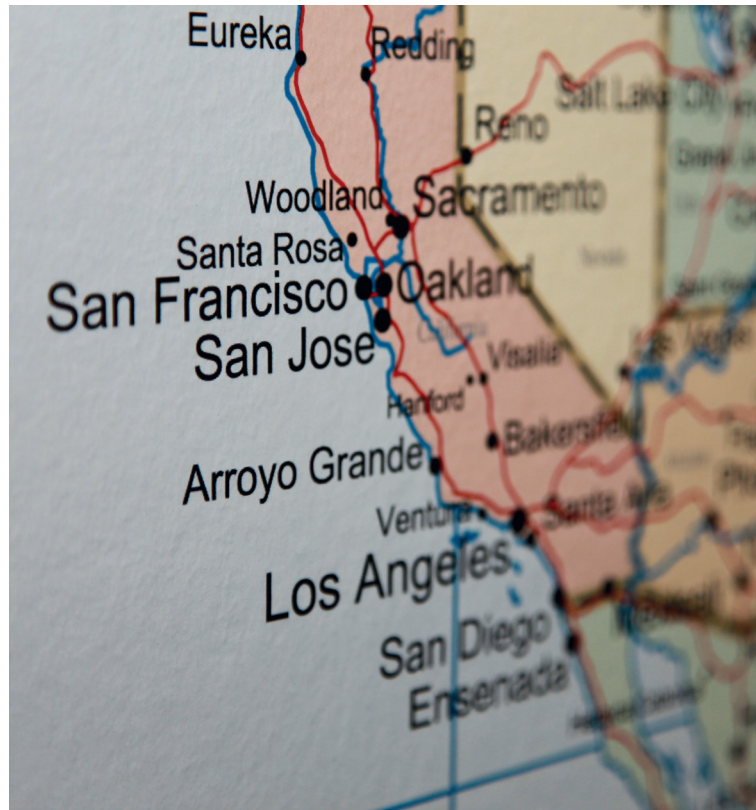
The beers as well as the brewers at the symposium represented both the 'old' and the 'new' world of sour and barrel aged beers, meaning Belgium and Northern France representing the traditional sour and barrel aged beer nations. The 'new' world of sour and barrel aged beers was represented by quite a few countries: Besides the US, which clearly dominated in the number of breweries now making sour beers, there was also representation from countries like Canada, Italy and even

Norway – with Haandbryggeriet proudly representing the Scandinavian brewing scene at this event. I know that the latter European countries are not traditionally considered to be part of the ‘new world’, but in terms of the tradition for brewing sour and barrel aged beers, they should be.

Several of the ‘old world’ sour and barrel aged breweries were also represented, with Cantillon and Boon as the most prominent examples.

As mentioned, the symposium did not include a professional technical programme, so it did not provide the expected background for me to use it for a short technical introduction to the unique craft of brewing sour and barrel aged beers. Thus, this will have to wait and be covered in a later article specifically on this subject. Further, I would have liked to present, in order to create some impression with my readers of the amazing array of beers presented at the symposium, the full list of beers and give my comments to the ones that I tried – at least the ones that made the biggest impression. This would also have presented a quite comprehensive picture of the myriad of different individual beer styles under the heading ‘Sour and Barrel Aged Beer’ and the trends amongst the breweries experimenting with these styles. But, unfortunately, Natalie and Vinnie have stuck very tightly to their purpose of the symposium, namely to provide a professional forum for those brewers that are themselves involved with the brewing of these styles. This means that they do not have a list (or, if they do, they do not want to have it published!) of the beers presented at the event. But don’t just take my word for this – let me quote what Natalie wrote me when I, upon my return, asked her for some more details in writing:

‘There is no list of beers. You will have to go from memory! Also, I did not take any pictures. We never intended to publicly promote this event so that is why there was no media in attendance. Vinnie and I decided to host a professional networking symposium for professional brewers who currently make, or plan to make, barrel-aged/sour beers due to the overwhelmingly positive response during one of his talks in Chicago. We have found the Craft Brewers Conference has grown so much over the years that it has become increasingly difficult to network with our peers. Most of us spend our time talking to wholesalers, vendors and retailers and don’t have much opportunity to reconnect with each other. We ended up turning away dozens of people who wanted to attend the symposium, which is a great indication of the need for such an event. There were no retailers, wholesalers, home brewers, consumers or media invited to



the symposium. We were thrilled with the outcome and heard many people walked away learning something and making new friends!’

Thus, had I ‘only’ been trying to be invited as the technical editor of the SBR, I would not have been able to attend! And I have to admit that I relied so heavily on being provided with the list of beers that I didn’t bother to take notes myself while attending. I hope and trust that I will be forgiven for the fact that the ‘memory’ Natalie refers to above is close to blank!! Honestly, I gave in completely to the unbelievable amount of amazing beers there, making me feel and act like a child being let loose in a sweet shop. Although being careful not to take too large samples of each beer, the effect of trying maybe around a hundred or so cannot be ignored – when I search my memory for what beers I tried, no names have stuck. Only the impression that this was the most amazing and rewarding symposium I have ever attended!

VISIT TO LAGUNITAS BREWING COMPANY IN PETALUMA, CA

On the morning of Wednesday, 23 March, I turned up for my appointment with Ron Lindenbusch, head of Sales and Marketing, at the Lagunitas Brewing Co. in Petaluma –





conveniently located on the way from Santa Rosa to San Francisco, where the Craft Brewers Conference was to start later that same day.

Ron has been with Lagunitas for 16 years, so although not himself a brewer, he has followed the development of the craft brewing scene in Northern California for most of its existence. And he is logically and definitely a true child of craft brewing – hospitable, inviting, open-minded, off-centred, anti-establishment, bright and unorthodox. I learned all this in a little less than two hours, which was all the time I could spend at Lagunitas. I was to regret this, as it turned out that I didn't even make it halfway through the brewery tour before having to leave. But, what the heck, as I said in the first article of these two: Craft beer is not about technology, it's about people. And speaking of people, I would not have missed meeting Ron for anything!

My visit turned out to coincide with that of a group of distributors from Virginia who were visiting Lagunitas to potentially persuade Ron into letting them carry the Lagunitas portfolio of beers. And yes, the understanding is right as far as Lagunitas is concerned: They do not currently look for distributors, the distributors look for them! As a matter of fact, Lagunitas is one of the handful or so of larger, regional US craft breweries who are currently moving out of several states where they were previously distributed. 'Oh, too bad – sales not really

going the way they should, it sounds like?' You could not be more wrong – sales are exploding at such a crazy rate that these breweries have to limit the areas where they are present in order to just barely supply the remaining distribution chains with enough beer! Amazing, but true, and Lagunitas – currently number 26 on the list of the largest US breweries with annual sales having crossed the 100.000 HL mark and growing by high two digit figures year on year – would have had astronomical sales growth figures, had their speed of expanding their brewing capacity not been a limiting factor.

What's the secret behind such a success? Well, if there was a simple answer to this question, craft beer would outsell standard lager in the US and elsewhere. But my rather untraditional visit to Lagunitas did make me a little wiser in this respect. And probably more so than if I'd been hanging out with the Lagunitas brewers, as brewers most often do when they visit other breweries.

'First things first', it seems to me that Ron said to himself at the start of the 10:30 am visit, so we went straight to the brewery bar! Over a couple of beers, Ron gave us – well, the distributor guys mostly, I guess – his version of the craft beer market and how to deal with it from a sales point of view. Giving a thorough account in this short article of all the things that Ron said is impossible. Not just for space reasons, but also as they came at an astonishing pace, and I had to attend to my beer,

as well. But the short version that was illustrated with several highly amusing anecdotes was:

Marketing at craft breweries is all about being true to the values of the brewery: making excellent beers just the way the brewers want them – no market fancy market research here – we know what good beer is and how to brew and sell it. And when the marketeers meet the customers, they obviously listen to their opponents, but they never bow into pressure, regardless of whether in form of trying to squeeze prices down, trying to change the beers as such or their packaging. And instead of paying for traditional advertising, you sponsor events with small, local up-and-coming bands. And you get involved in other activities that you yourself think are cool – not what a PR agency tells you are cool! So in many ways, craft beer marketing is a very different ‘beast’ as compared to the marketing strategy at a mega brewer. And then again... when I talk to marketing people at craft breweries and see what they are doing, I get the feeling that they are doing precisely what the mega brewer marketeers are trying to do (and what some of them probably believe they are achieving): They are meeting their consumers eye-to-eye, talking the simple and honest language they understand and can relate to. They do not try to convince the consumer that he or she will become a different and more ‘hip’ person from drinking a particular brand of beer. Instead, the craft brewer simply communicates (in more or less subtle ways) that we are like you. We like the same things, and we do the same things. And if this is actually true, the consumers obviously start thinking of the craft brand as a natural friend and part of their lives. Does this make any sense? Maybe not, but then maybe some of the stories that can be found on the Lagunitas website can illustrate what I’m trying to say:

‘From our earliest days of striving to make consistently good beer, and instead making beer that ranged from vile, to barely drinkable, to wonderful, to elegant, to questionable-at-best. From being castigated by our West Marin neighbors to finally suffering an “eviction” by our West Marin septic system. From

landing in the welcoming arms of Petaluma, and actually getting our beer into bottles, onto the streets, and into the hands of sympathetic beer geeks, to steadily losing less money each month. From all this and more, Lagunitas Brewing Company is emerging as a battle-tested brewery capable of making great beer out of goat’s milk, brambles, and asphalt on the surface of the Moon, if need be.

As the poet once said, “Where, but for the grace of God and the kindness of strangers, go I.” Where go we indeed, whatever that means’.

I leaned back with my feet up on my desk. I read my name backwards on the door and wondered. Like a bad joke told to a brown shoed square in the dead of night, it all came rushing back to me. I thought carefully about getting up from my desk, putting on my new Velarimosa prawn hat, opening the door to the hallway, checking the spelling on my name one more time, closing the door behind me, heading down to the first floor, making my way down the evening street full of worn out proles and pinheads, finding the corrupt pirate pastrami burrito vendor who trades fist fulls of change for volcanic gastritis, continuing to a dark doorway the length of which would lead me to a knuckle worn bar top of mildew and pine, mounting a bow-legged stool and ordering a pint of the nectaral Maximus Ale. And then I did’. ◊

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank the Danish Brewers’ Guild for making my trip possible by awarding me the yearly portion of the Brinch travel grant for 2011.