

THE BEER SCENE IN WINE COUNTRY

PART ONE

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Our technical editor, Anders Kissmeyer, received the 2011 yearly travel grant from the Danish Brewers' Guild for a trip to Northern California late March to early April this year. The trip included attending both the Craft Brewers Conference 2011 in San Francisco from 23 March through 26 March (covered in a separate article in this issue of the SBR), the 'Sour Beer and Barrel Aged Beer Symposium' at Russian River Brewing Company on 22 March, as well as visits to a few selected breweries in the Sonoma County area in order to get a feel of what's currently brewing in the Northern California beer scene these days. This article is the first of two covering the latter topic.

Craft beer is not about technology or fancy shining and expensive equipment; nor is it about lean production or supply chain management. It's about people, passion and visions of what good beer is and can be. If there were ever a risk that I might forget this, my tour of a few breweries in the beautiful wine country north of San Francisco certainly brought it back to my attention! I had this in mind when I planned my trip to the area north of San Francisco, generously sponsored by a travel grant donated by the Danish Brewers' Guild, and I am happy that I did. Not only did the visits not nearly give me enough hard, technical facts like capacities, yearly outputs, tank volumes, mashing profiles, fermentation processes, packaging equipment, etc. to report on, but even if they had, it would have been beside the point as these data are, in my view, neither very relevant nor very entertaining. In line with my opening statement, it was my intention to try to investigate the soul of the craft breweries I visited. In short, I have been trying to look inside the heads and hearts of the brewers rather than inside their breweries. I hope you will enjoy reading about my journey at least partly as much as I enjoyed making it!

MEETING BRIAN HUNT AT THE MOONLIGHT BREWING CO.

I met Brian at his brewery (<http://www.moonlightbrewing.com>) far into the hilly countryside west of Santa Rosa, in the middle of the Sonoma Valley, on an early spring Sunday afternoon.

The brewery produces only 1,800 HL of beer per year, all packaged in kegs and sold very locally, the furthest accounts being in the city of San Francisco 50 miles away. That is if we forget about Denmark, where a few kegs of Brian's beer recently have been imported by Mikkeller and put on draft at the Mikkeller Ølbar – one of the best beer bars in Copenhagen – in Vesterbro.

Brian proudly wears a 'Moonlight Brewing Company' work-shirt with the title 'Safety Manager' woven into it. And this is not false advertising, as Brian really is the safety manager of the brewery, as he is the brewer, and the sales department, and the packaging manager and accountant...Yes, you've guessed it: Brian does everything at the brewery himself. Although, not quite anymore as he has actually hired a part time assistant brewer, Jeff Barkley, a few years ago.

The 'tour' of the tiny and primitive brewery took about 15 minutes and was accompanied by the first couple of samples of Moonlight beer. A simple and manual 12 HL brewing system plus a cold room with four to five fermenters and a dozen or so old Grundy-tanks that have been retrofitted for use as combined secondary fermentation, maturation and bright beer tanks – the beer from Moonlight is all unfiltered. But, as mentioned in my introduction, craft beer is not about technology. The brewery equipment at Moonlight looks like what you can find in hundreds of American craft breweries, although I think that it rarely will be seen cramped as much together as at Moonlight. Brian's current permission to brew beer is restricted to a total space of 1,000 square feet, ca. 90 m² – very little, even considering the small production. In front of the brewery, there's a small hop yard, and, as Brian explains, this is essential to Moonlight's existence as a brewery. Logically, not because Brian is depending on using his own hops to brew his beers – he only does that once a year in one or two fresh-hop seasonals – but because the brewery is located in an agricultural zone where industrial production per se is not allowed. But, says Brian with one of his many and sly, tongue-in-cheek smiles, 'It's permitted to process agricultural products on site!'

Craft beer is about people, their thoughts, ambitions, philosophies, dreams and objectives, so, soon we found ourselves sitting in front of the brewery in two plastic chairs, looking out over the barren hop yard, watching the hawks circling over the hills beyond. Here, we continued the sampling of the various Moonlight beers and had a real 'brewer-to-brewer' talk on beer, brewing philosophies and the general conditions of craft brewing in Sonoma County as well as in Scandinavia.

Death and Taxes

The talk was long, lively and most enjoyable. Not only because your editor and reporter quickly discovered that Brian Hunt was a kindred spirit, but maybe even more so because it soon became very clear that Brian is a brewer with just as much humour as he has opinions... and that says a lot. With each beer we had, the topics of our conversation changed, reflecting where this particular beer inspired the conversation to take us. The first beer was a Czech style pilsner called 'Reality Czech', brewed with traditional raw materials, but German Perle as the aroma hop. My immediate reaction was that this was not just balanced, clean and tasty, but also very, very drinkable. No surprise, Brian quickly caught that ball and left me in no doubt as to his beer philosophy: 'If the beer does not go down

easy – preferably one pint after the other – I will not brew it, and none of my regular beers are higher than 6 per cent ABV'. The following two beers perfectly proved his point: First, a special version of the 'Reality Czech', brewed for the Craft Brewers Conference, with Saaz as the aroma hops instead of Perle, followed by the Moonlight Brewing Company's flagship beer, 'Death and Taxes' – what a name for a beer! A dark, almost black, lager at 5.5 per cent ABV that I happened to call a Schwarzbier. I was quickly and very squarely corrected, 'No,' said Brian, 'Death and Taxes' is NOT a Schwarzbier; it's Death and Taxes!' Schwarzbiers, in Brian's opinion, are generally rather sweet beers, and Brian – precisely like your editor/reporter – does not like sweetness in lagers. So, 'Death and Taxes' is a dry, crisp yet both full-bodied and highly drinkable black lager. Call it what you like – it's an excellent and very food friendly beer. This I can say safely, as I later that week had the chance to enjoy 'Death and Taxes' with the great food at the small, exceptionally great beer bar and restaurant, Monk's Kettle (<http://www.monkskettle.com>), in San Francisco.

Bittering units, hops and beer flavour

When I asked Brian about the BU's in his beers, his answer was that he didn't have a clue!! His philosophy on this was that he adds the amount and the type of hops that is just right for the flavour and taste of each of his beers. The point behind →



his provocative and perhaps slightly exaggerated ignorance of the BU's in the beers is that the hype surrounding ever higher declared BU's in beers is crazy! Ever so often, the calculated, measured or theoretical BU level in a beer says preciously little about the perceived bitterness and balance of a beer, which is what really matters. Again, an issue where I had to agree fully with my generous and wise host!

While on our way to go draw the fourth beer of the day from the bright tanks in the cold room, Brian took me to a pine-like tree next to the brewery and pulled off the outermost tips of a branch for me to chew on: Piney, of course, but highly aromatic and not nearly as coarsely bitter and astringent as I had expected. Before telling me why I had to chew on pine needles, Brian had poured the next beer, 'Two Weeks Notice', and asked me what hops were in it. It was a hazy golden beer with a spicy nose to it, and in the mouth it had some phenolic wheat beer flavour notes and a mellow sweetness balanced by a smooth and pleasant bitterness. I smelled and sipped again, and then openly admitted to Brian that I've never been good at identifying individual hop varieties when they are blended in a beer,

so I had to give up on the question. A big grin appeared on Brian's face: 'I love to do that to the snobby beer geeks whenever I can,' Brian grinned, 'And I love it when they go on about Cascades, Willamette, Chinook and whatnot. Then I softly tell them that this beer contains no hops at all! It's brewed with a gruit-like blend of herbs – yarrow, local bog myrtle and more.' This led to a long discussion about the qualities of the pre-hop era gruit herbs that Brian believes to have similar anti-microbial activities as do hops. Brian thus challenged my philosophy of always gently (to about 10 BU's) hopping also 'non-hopped' beers for micro reasons. Brian's experience with brewing 'Two Weeks Notice' is remarkable – and supported by my good friend Will Meyers from the Cambridge Brewing Company in Boston: When you are fermenting these gruit or gruit-like beers, the yeast goes crazy and ferments the beer out in 24 hours or less! This certainly is an observation that I can take back with me to the 'Danish Microbrew' innovation and applied research project that I am part of (and which will be covered later in a article in the SBR), as the anti-microbial effect of certain herbs and spices is one of key research areas in this project.



The connection here between my chewing the spruce tips and ‘Two Weeks Notice’ is that Brian yearly brews a ‘fresh-tip-spruce-beer’ at the time in the spring when the new tips on this spruce are precisely ripe for brewing. And like in ‘Two Weeks Notice’, the spruce tips fully replace the hops as aroma, bittering and micro-stabiliser in the beer.

Later, Don Barkley of the NapaSmith Brewery in Napa, and also father of Brian’s assistant, Jeff, joined us. Don is a true veteran of the craft scene in Northern California – well, in the US in general – as Don was a part of the legendary and long gone New Albion Brewing Company that opened in Sonoma County in 1978 and, by many, is credited with more or less starting the whole US craft beer revolution.

In five and a half weeks...

Several times during the day, Brian returned to the sentence: ‘In five and a half weeks...’ What this turned out to mean was Brian’s upcoming visit to Denmark, where he will be brewing a collaborative brew with Mikkel Bjerg-Borgsøe (Mikkeller) and the Amager Bryghus boys at their brewery. Brian will also visit a few breweries in Norway and attend the Copenhagen Beer Festival in late May. Brian made no effort to disguise his excitement over the coming trip. When the occasional airplane passed several miles above us, Brian said every time, ‘Soon I’ll be on board that plane!’ To many brewers, the idea of being the only person responsible for brewing their beers seems the ultimate dream. And Brian and I agreed that this certainly brings both huge advantages in the sense that you do not have to fight with marketing people, general managers or accountants over what you want to brew or do otherwise, and that you answer to no one but yourself. But Brian openly admitted that, in later years, the prospect of travelling to visit other brewers and breweries and to sense and feel what their worlds are all about had seemed equally tempting and inaccessible to him as he could not leave the brewery for more than perhaps a day at the time. So, one of the reasons for taking on an assistant at the brewery was definitely to give Brian the freedom to follow the dream of travelling. The smile on Brian’s face while explaining this was more telling than his words...



THE BREWERY EQUIPMENT AT MOONLIGHT LOOKS LIKE WHAT YOU CAN FIND IN HUNDREDS OF AMERICAN CRAFT BREWERIES, ALTHOUGH I THINK THAT IT RARELY WILL BE SEEN CRAMPED AS MUCH TOGETHER AS AT MOONLIGHT. BRIAN’S CURRENT PERMISSION TO BREW BEER IS RESTRICTED TO A TOTAL SPACE OF 1,000 SQUARE FEET, VERY LITTLE



One of the most enjoyable and memorable days in my career as a travelling SBR correspondent and brewer was coming to an end. Lots of interesting beers and lots of important and sympathetic opinions had come my way that day. But even more importantly: I was a dear friend richer when I left, and I can’t wait to brew with Brian at Amager on 21 May, and at Moonlight next year when the Craft Brewers Conference and the World Beer Cup will be held in San Diego.

The ‘Sour Beer and Barrel Ageing Seminar’ held at the Russian River Brewing Co. on 22 March will be covered in a separate, later article in the SBR.

VISIT TO BEAR REPUBLIC BREWING CO. IN HEALDSBURG, CA

Before the symposium at Russian River on the afternoon of 22 March, I took a drive about 30 miles North of Santa Rosa to the town of Healdsburg with my two friends, Megan and Will, from the Cambridge Brewing Co. in Boston. →



I LOVE TO DO THAT TO THE SNOBBY BEER GEEKS WHENEVER I CAN, AND I LOVE IT WHEN THEY GO ON ABOUT CASCADES, WILLAMETTE, CHINOOK AND WHATNOT. THEN I SOFTLY TELL THEM THAT THIS BEER CONTAINS NO HOPS AT ALL! IT'S BREWED WITH A GRUIT-LIKE BLEND OF HERBS – YARROW, LOCAL BOG MYRTLE AND MORE



We paid a visit to the origin of Bear Republic Brewing Co, the brewpub in the centre of Healdsburg, tasting most of the beers and talking to the brewer – who was very busy in anticipation of the events later in the week where a fair number of the thousands of attendees at the Craft Brewers Conference in San Francisco were expected to pay the brewpub a visit.

Nice beers and a nice atmosphere in the 16-year-old brewpub, but still hardly material to write anything that would come just close to my intense and gratifying visit to Brian at Moonlight. Thus, I have clipped a bit from an interview with the head brewer and founder of Bear Republic, Richard Norgrove, in a recent entry for the blog, Wine Country Beer (<http://winecountrybeer.com>):

Wine country's discriminating taste offers a challenge and a benefit

A highly creative food, wine and beer environment permeates wine country. The region's beverage customer is a more educated, more demanding consumer. There are also a lot more foodies. There is stiff competition in a relatively small market. It seems this

could add up to make a brewer's life pretty tough, but Richard Norgrove disagrees. 'We're at a day and age now where what I love about living in Sonoma County is just this incredible amount of educated palates,' Norgrove says, 'I'm given tremendously more leeway than somebody who may be trying to do this in some other part of the country. That actually lends to more creativity because I can throw out a specialized cask beer or make a small lot and use it to educate the customer who comes in. I use it as a test to see if the beer is going to work'.

*'Most of the winemakers that come into our pub have no problem giving me constructive criticism,' says Norgrove with a laugh, 'I have a tremendous respect for the wine industry because it's the lifeblood of our county. People in Sonoma are used to finding specialty boutique wines, and there's a natural synergy to the fact that you can also find specialty cheeses, breads and beer. It just goes hand in hand'. There is also a nice cooperative relationship among the local brewers and winemakers. 'We used local Chardonnay barrels from a winery that's literally right over the hill for aging a beer we call **Toyon Brut**,' Norgrove says, as he explains that there is no shortage of offers of used wine barrels for use in the brewery. Norgrove decided he wanted to create a beer that had a unique Sonoma signature. He starts by brewing a pretty standard ale recipe, but that's where things take an unusual turn. The unfermented beer fresh from the brew kettle is poured into open fermenters and allowed to mingle with the springtime Cloverdale air. No brewer's yeast is added. The beer is instead inoculated with the natural wild yeasts found in the local air. It undergoes a spontaneous fermentation, and once the primary fermentation is completed, the beer is pumped into the Chardonnay barrels for some aging. 'We age the beer with the microbes left over in the barrels,' Norgrove says, 'After two months, there's a little bit of brettanomyces in there; there's a little bit of diacetyl. We blend the barrels and put them back in stainless to finish. You get a nice beer that's a little more spritzzy than our normal ales'.*

A beer drinker's brewery first and foremost

Even though Bear Republic makes a bunch of specialty, small lot, and limited-edition seasonal beers, the brewery has not in any way lost its focus on the traditional craft ale customer.

*‘We cater to the beer drinker,’ Norgrove states adamantly as he tells that about 85 per cent of the brewery’s annual production is **Racer 5**, its very popular IPA. ‘We brewers never want to get to the point where beer is unapproachable. The moment you take beer and you try to make it something that’s unapproachable, you make it unattainable. And then unattainable creates a level of elitism’.*

Expanding horizons

Norgrove finds that wine country tourists and locals alike are looking to expand their horizons. It’s the beauty of being in wine country, he says.

‘I just hope that folks visiting wine country will at least also stop in and try the beer,’ he adds, ‘The tourists will go through their day and get saturated with wine and eventually they’ll go, “Where can I get a good beer?” That’s what we’re here for’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank the Danish Brewers’ Guild for making my trip possible by awarding me the yearly travel grant for 2011. The rest of the brewery visits, including the ‘Sour and Barrel Aged Beer Symposium’ at Russian River Brewing Co., will be covered in a second article in the next issue (No. 4, 2011) of the SBR. ¹





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