



Photo by Karen Rabin

The author explores Vail's fabled back bowls during the 2011 Big Beers, Belgians and Barleywines Festival.

BIG BEERS 2011

A Festival by Any Other Name

By Dan Rabin

To call Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines simply a “festival” doesn’t do it justice. More proper monikers for Vail’s annual early January beer rendezvous might include Rocky Mountain Retreat, Brewfest Extraordinaire and Beer Fantasy Camp.

The combination of educational seminars, beer dinners, a first-rate commercial tasting and an overall good vibe sets Big Beers apart from other beer-themed events, especially winter events. Add to that its home base in the luxe ski-in/ski-out Vail Cascade Resort & Spa, and it’s no wonder that Big Beers increasingly attracts many of the most recognizable, well-respected and influential individuals in the American craft beer scene.

I arrived for the 11th incarnation of Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines on Thursday evening. Although I was too late to attend the fest’s kickoff event, the annual Calibration Dinner hosted by Sam Calagione (Dogfish Head) and Adam Avery (Avery Brewing), the Cascade’s comfy Fireside Bar was abuzz with beer folk from coast to coast and as far away as Belgium. Throughout the weekend, the pub’s five taps featured a rotating selection of high-gravity and Belgian-style beers shipped in from breweries attending the fest.

I know of no similar beer-themed event that offers the opportunity to rub elbows with so many of the craft beer industry’s movers and shakers in a relaxed and intimate setting.

Over the years, the fest’s educational components have continually expanded. Ray Daniels offered a free half-day Cicerone workshop. The well-known author, craft beer publicist and Cicerone program founder and director also administered certification exams during the weekend. A Saturday morning “World of Sours” seminar featured presentations and plentiful samples from Sean Knoll (Artisanal Imports), Adam Avery and Tomme Arthur (The Lost Abbey). Soon after, Daniel Bradford, publisher of *All About Beer Magazine*, offered a well-attended workshop called “Hops, Hops & More Hops.”

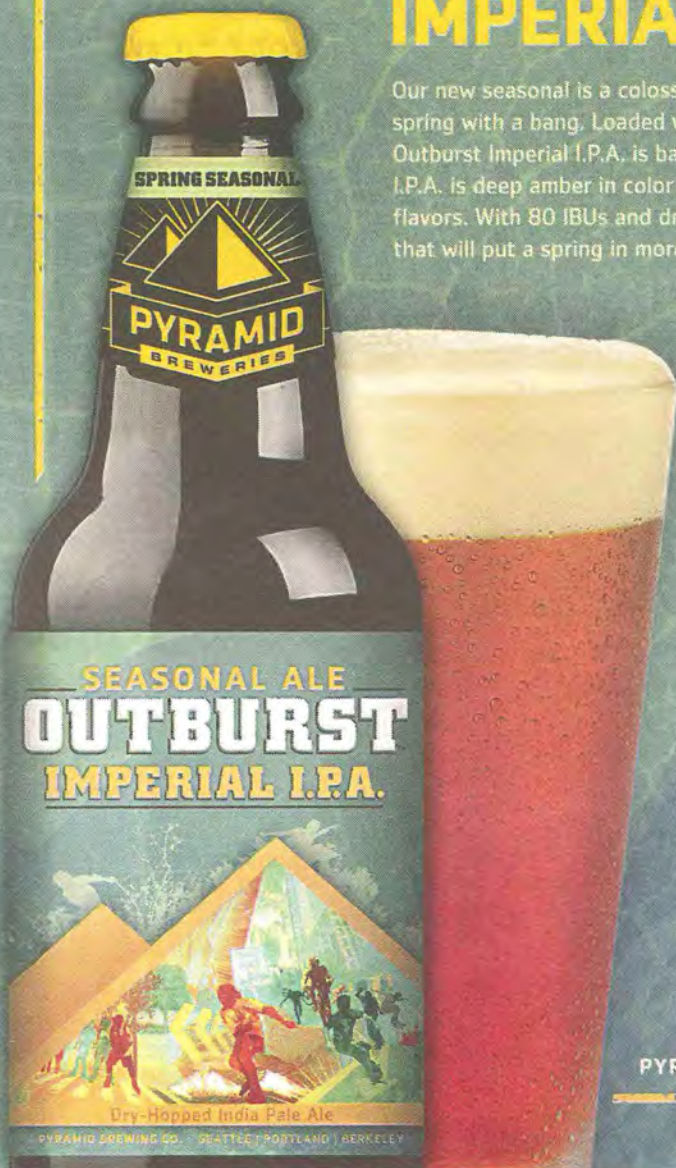
Sam Calagione gave a talk on “Regional Brewing Traditions Around the World,” based on his travels while taping the “Brewmasters” television

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The crew at Humpy's SubZero: chef Tim Farley, sous-chef Randy "RP" Barry and owner/beer guy Billy Opinsky.

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Obliteration VII American Imperial Stout is a rich, roasty-toasty malt monster at 8.5% and 100 IBUs. And if the trend toward black hoppy ales is your thing, check out XXX Oak Aged Black Double IPA if you can get past the black pale ale part. Soft barrel flavors make this one singular.

Glacier BrewHouse featured its Big Wood Fest with five beauties on offer, including the magnificent Eisbock, aged eight months in Maker's Mark Bourbon barrels. A trio of barley wine brews offered a tantalizing preview of beers to come at the fest. My favorite was the 2009 Big Woody, aged 18 months in a virgin American oak barrel. In addition to all this, the food at Glacier continues to be exceptional.

Alaskans not only love beer, they make it too! This is made manifest in the large turnout at the Great Northern Brewers Club meeting, held every Thursday before the festival at Snow Goose/Sleeping Lady restaurant and brewery. The lower-level theater was packed with club members, industry reps and visitors up for the fest, all sharing beer and stories about brewing in Alaska.

This year's featured guest was Ken Grossman, owner of Sierra Nevada Brewing Company in Chico, Calif. His iconic brewery was celebrating its 30th year in the brewing business, and Grossman brought along a wonderful PowerPoint presentation of the history of his brewery, underscoring the homebrew origins of what has become the preeminent craft brewer in the country. Grossman was in good company, as the club's previous beer luminaries include the late "Beer Hunter," Michael Jackson; homebrew

patriarch Charlie Papazian; Dogfish Head owner and media maven Sam Calagione; and many others.

First- and second-round judging for winter beers and barley wines took place at the start of the Friday session of the festival. Following that was an industry gathering at Café Amsterdam sponsored by Alaskan Brewing. Great beer, excellent food and brewing-industry camaraderie prevailed.

On Saturday I helped judge the final round for barley wine. The Connoisseur Session opened at 2:00 p.m., and we announced the winners of the judging around 3:30 p.m. The winner was a clear favorite of the judging panel. Black Raven Brewing Company's Old Birdbrain 2009, from Redmond, Wash., walked away with top honors. Second was St. Elias Brewing Company, Soldotna, Alaska, and third was Glacier BrewHouse, Anchorage, Alaska. Glacier BrewHouse brewer Kevin Burton also picked up the trophy for Best Winter Beer for his barrel-aged 2010 Eisbock. The Alaskan version of the Rolling Boil Blues Band (Frozen Boil?) played at 4:00 p.m. to close out the session.

The final session ran from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m., after which Alaskan livers went into restorative phase. Alaska Beer Week was an enormous but taxing success (thanks, Barb Miller and Dr. Fermento!) and undoubtedly will be back next year. Be sure to put January 20–21 on your calendar for next year's fest and reserve the whole week for a truly memorable, if somewhat chilly, beer experience. **CBN**

Tom Dalldorf is publisher and editor of the Celebrator Beer News.

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series for the Discovery Channel. Dogfish Head's brewmaster, Floris Delée, was on hand to offer his colorful commentary as attendees sipped samples of Pangaea, Chicha, Midas Touch and Bitches Brew.

Each year, Big Beers brings in a pair of featured brewmasters, one from a domestic brewery and one from abroad, to speak on an area of expertise and to cohost Friday evening's Brewmasters' Dinner. This year, the brewmasters included Belgian-born Steven Pauwels of Kansas City's well-respected Boulevard Brewing and Chris Bauweraerts, cofounder of Belgium's Brasserie

the temperatures mild and the snow in good shape during my exploration of the mammoth 5,289-acre resort. The view of the Rockies from Two Elk Lodge, on the ridge separating Vail's front side from the fabled back bowls, was literally breathtaking. Or maybe it was the 11,220-foot elevation.

The high point and final event of Big Beers 2011 was Saturday's over-the-top commercial tasting. As I meandered through the animated crowd, I repeatedly heard people mention how impressed they were with the number of well-known brewers from across the country who were not just in attendance, but were serving their beers and chatting it up with



Rob Tod, founder of Portland, Maine's Allagash Brewing Company, pours a beer at the 2011 Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines Festival in Vail, Colo.

d'Achouffe. Bauweraerts conducted a "SlowBrew Tour of Belgium," covering a variety of topics related to Belgian beers and breweries. He began by pointing out that his quirky beer-intensive homeland is the size of Maryland, has three languages and is home to 120 breweries. Pauwels followed with a slightly more technical discussion of Belgian yeast. No one went thirsty during either presentation.

The Big Beer's homebrew competition kept judges occupied with over 200 entries. In addition to the two beer dinners, Big Beer's other food-related component was an entertaining and lighthearted "Food and Beer Pairing Smackdown," moderated by Brewers Association beer evangelist Julia Herz. Four brewers attempted to convince the audience that a beer selected from their brewery's portfolio provided the best pairing with a tangy aged cheddar from Vermont's Grafton Village Cheese Company. For the second consecutive year, the audience voted Boulevard's Pauwels top honors. His Tank 7 Farmhouse Ale worked wonders alongside the savory cheese.

Like many of the attendees, brewers and industry professionals who came for the weekend, I managed to sneak in a ski session during my stay. The country's largest ski resort lived up to its all-star billing. The skies were clear,

festival-goers. Avery and Calagione were manning the taps at adjacent stations. Greg Koch (Stone), Matt Brynildson (Firestone Walker), Tomme Arthur (The Lost Abbey) and Rob Tod (Allagash) had traveled from the coasts to show off their tasty creations. Local brewers Eric Wallace (Left Hand), Brian Dunn (Great Divide) and Peter Bouckaert (New Belgium) were serving their beers and schmoozing with the crowd. And the list goes on and on.

As Big Beer's visibility has grown over the years, it has become as much a high-spirited get-together for industry folks as a first-rate weekend getaway for beer fans. In fact, I know of no similar beer-themed event that offers the opportunity to rub elbows with so many of the craft beer industry's movers and shakers in a relaxed and intimate setting.

Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines is a class act. No matter how you label it. **CBN**

Dan Rabin is a beer and travel writer who homebrews and obsesses about all things beerish from his home in Boulder, Colo. You can e-mail him at brewstraveler@comcast.net.