“I hate beer”.

That what the attractive mature lady pronounced at a local beer festival a few years back. I was working my booth when she confessed that she thought it was a beer *and wine* festival that her friends had brought her to that spring day. And though her tone was playful, I knew she was serious. She had noticed that my beers, primarily Belgian and Trappist, cost two tickets whereas the other beer booths were only one. “Just give me the least beery beer you have and let’s get this over with” she sighed. But the story had a happy ending….

Belgian beers are generally regarded by most beer “experts” as the world’s finest- and for solid reasons. They are also difficult to brew properly and are often not even close to the style they aspire to be- and are simply given a “Belgiany” name. Here in the Charleston Brewery District I was poured a Belgian style “Trippel” that was dark gold, flat, and heavy with malt. Not even close. So I shook my head slowly, worked through the beer, and appreciated that I now had an inspiration for this week’s blog.

Despite all of the psudo-Belgian beers out there (I’m looking at you Blue Moon) there are a few very specific traits that make “real” Belgian beers unique. But I want to focus on the one that is the toughest to emulate by our Craft Brewers here in the CBD. Attenuation.

For the sake of readability, I will generalize a bit. Average yeast will break down roughly 65% of wort from malted grain (barley, wheat, or rye). The remaining 35ish% is residual sugar. Balance that sweetness with hops and you have beer. Belgian yeast strains, however, up the ante and can go well to the mid to upper 70% range with a skilled brewer- saisons up into the 80s. So the hops are reduced to maintain balance and you get a beer that is neither malty nor hoppy- but GRAIN FORWARD. Boom. Dry, excellent carbonation, and generally high alcohol. And delicious.

So why are they tough to brew? Well our heroic brewers have better access to Belgian yeast strains than ever before, but that doesn’t insure a Belgian beer. Yeast is like the engine of a car. Just because you buy a 416 c.i.d. supercharged LS crate engine and pop it into your garage project doesn’t mean you have a race car. Lots of work left to do.

Most true Belgian beers have been fermenting the same grain builds for generations creating “instincts” that cannot be simulated without the decades of experience. Think of pure bred dogs that have natural instincts that didn’t have to be learned- they inherited them from their ancestors. Yeast is a living thing, is used over generations, and basically does the same thing.

So next time you pop into Munkle, Edmund’s Oast, Cooper River, Fatty’s, or any of our other fine breweries investigate a Belgian and let me know your thoughts. And as for the ending of the tale of the attractive lady… buy me a pint and I’ll tell you the whole story.

Cheers!

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