



**May 2011**

*Copyright Rich Higgins, 2011.*

This month, we'll be tasting two great saisons. Saisons are often called farmhouse ales, which paints a pleasant, bucolic picture, but offers few clues about the beers' flavors. Whereas styles like Pale Ale or Pilsner are quite prescriptive to a brewer, saison merely hints at when the beer is traditionally brewed and enjoyed. Saisons originally were brewed on farmsteads during the winter months after the grain harvest, and then were aged for several months until the summer growing season. During an age when the cleanliness of water sources could not be trusted, saison beer was a valuable source of hydration (and calories) for seasonal farm labor.

Through the centuries in the southern, French-speaking part of Belgium called Wallonia, farmers took advantage of the down times between growing seasons by brewing beer from the harvested grain. On larger farms the beer was brewed with onsite equipment, and for smaller farmers, the beer was brewed communally in villages, with multiple farmers contributing grain and time to the brews, each coming away with casks of wort to ferment back at their farmhouses.

Because of the rusticity of and variability in the local brewing ingredients and equipment, the beers had a variety of different tastes. However, because the beer was meant to slake thirst throughout a day of manual labor, the beers were crisp and not too alcoholic. In a time when most beer was drunk within the first couple weeks of brewing for fear of spoilage, the farmers had to rely on natural preservatives to keep their beer untainted between the winter months when the beer was brewed and the summer months when it was needed. Alcohol is a preservative, but these beers couldn't be so strong as to inebriate farmhands during the work day. (Historians estimate that manual laborers in the Middle Ages drank about 5 liters of low-alcohol beer a day.)

Saisons relied on two other preservatives: hops and acidity. Hops have been used to inhibit bacterial growth and keep beers "clean" for centuries. And the farmy milieu of these beers, full of orchards, grains, and livestock, frequently exposed the beer to wild yeasts and bacteria that added a tinge of lactic acidity and earthy, leathery underpinnings to the beer. Even today, saison yeast is a mixed culture that relies on brewers yeast as well as wilder critters to leave the beers fruity, spicy, earthy, a little tart, and bone-dry.

Thus, saison tends to be a light-colored beer, dry and hoppily assertive, with beguiling Belgian yeast characteristics. Sometimes spices like coriander, cumin, ginger, and star anise are used to add subtle nuance. The resulting beer should always be extremely refreshing, and most saisons will have lemony, peppery, and earthy qualities from the yeast, as well as be light in color and have a more pronounced hoppiness than most other Belgian beer styles. Above all, Belgians agree, a saison should have extraordinary character.

This ages-old beer, brewed in times of convenience for times of necessity, small-batch and hyper-local, began a more rapid evolution in the 1920s. It was around that time in Belgium that English and German imported beers began to threaten the domestic beer market. Imported bottled beer nimbly penetrated into expanded markets where bulky, local draft beer could not reach. Artificial refrigeration could keep beer clean and cold at all times, taking some of the seasonality and preservative hoppiness out of brewing. Belgians who had enjoyed the low-alcohol, astringent, dry beers like saison began to drink bigger, softer beers like pale ales from England and lagers from Bavaria. Farm machinery reduced reliance on manual labor, and less saison was needed in the fields. The number of saison brewers declined as fewer farmers continued to brew.

While some farmers put down their mash paddles, others dropped their hoes to become full-time saison brewers. They responded to the change in the beer landscape by robustly bottling and bottle conditioning their product, allowing for champagne-like carbonation and an attractive and aromatic head of foam to form when poured. Also, alcohol levels and palate-fullness crept up to compete with imported beers. Floral, spicy English and German hops were used for bitterness, rather than local Belgian hops that could sometimes taste medicinal and soapy. Adaptations like these, along with a reinvigoration of artisan foodways and the development of an American love of Belgian beer, have helped saison to look beyond its seasonal, agrarian roots to a happy, hoppy future.



### **Saison Dupont**

**Brasserie Dupont, Tourpes, Hainaut, Belgium**

**6.5% ABV    \$/375 mL**

*Copyright Rich Higgins, 2011.*

Brasserie Dupont proudly brews what is widely recognized as the benchmark saison. The brewery was acquired by the family in 1920 an attempt to keep a family member from emigrating to Canada. During World War II, the brewing tanks were buried on the adjacent farm to hide them from Nazi Germans on the hunt for scrap metal. By the late 1980s, the brewery's best-seller was Moinette, a strong golden ale at 8% abv. When paid a visit by US beer importer Don Feinberg, Brewmaster Marc Rosier was surprised Feinberg wanted to import the saison, his least-popular beer. Fortunately for us, Feinberg persisted, and we can now enjoy Saison Dupont in the US. Since then, the style has made a rebound in Belgium, too.

When a bottle of Saison Dupont is opened, ultra fine carbonation leaps forth from the beer, awakening the bouquet and rousing the yeast at the bottom of the bottle. Pour it into a wine glass or tulip and allow the billowy head to trap in the aroma. Smells of wool, damp earth, and leather are accented with lemon, lavender, flowers, and pie crust. Sipping it shows flavors of lush lemon, white pepper, earth, salt, parsley, bitter hops, and an artichoke-y nuttiness. The beer is refreshing and mouth-wetting at first, but the mouthfeel is dominated by the high carbonation and a structured astringency. The finish is dry and bitter, begging you to drink more.

Saisons are phenomenal with a huge variety of foods. They've got dryness and acidity to cut through rich foods (read: fatty), fruit and spice to play with herbs, cheeses, and meats, earthiness to harmonize with beef and mushrooms, minerality to work with smoke and charring from the grill, and an almost briny umami to luxuriate any bite of food. Try Saison Dupont with a starter of artichokes and olive oil, move on to a caesar salad with anchovies, graduate to pizza with Italian sausage and grilled escarole, and complete your saison tryst with lemon chiffon pie.

### **Le Merle**

**North Coast Brewing Company, Ft. Bragg, California**

**7.9% ABV    \$/750 mL**

Fast-forward to the U.S. at the turn of the 21st century. Craft brewing had established itself as a profitable industry built upon the idea that beer should be flavorful and be influenced by the scores of great beer styles. Like many early American craft brewers, Mark Ruedrich had traveled to the UK and had been inspired to brew beer that borrowed from English tradition. He opened North Coast Brewing Company in 1988, and after more than 15 years of winning awards with his pale ales, red ale, and stouts, Ruedrich turned to Belgium for new inspiration. He fell in love with saison -- beautiful but under appreciated, even in its own country -- and began to brew Le Merle. (Le Merle is the French term for blackbird, hence the bird on the label. However, the beer is actually named after Ruedrich's wife, Merle.)

Le Merle is a softer, citrusy interpretation of saison, as Ruedrich uses bright, citrusy American hops instead of peppery European hops. The beer has a hint of lemongrass and orange peel; these could be from the yeast or from additions of the genuine articles, or both. While it has the very dry finish of a saison, Le Merle is a considerably higher-alcohol beer than most Belgian saisons, and as such it has a fuller mouthfeel and the fruit notes seem slightly sweeter than those of many Belgian originals. Also, Le Merle trades the astringency and minerality of Belgian examples for softer, peach-pit-like tannins and a briny, sea spray finish. Though the residual sugar is minimal, a honeyish taste is accentuated by the yeast's fruity esters. Overall, Le Merle is decidedly New-World -- softer, more lush, and more hedonistic than its Belgian counterparts.

In food, saison has far fewer enemies than friends (beer writer Garrett Oliver calls saison "promiscuous"), so you'll be able to enjoy Le Merle with a wide variety of foods. To play up Le Merle's citrusy qualities, treat yourself to brie with orange and ginger marmalade, citrus-marinated olives, scallop and lime ceviche, or slices of Boccalone's orange and fennel salame.