



Hop Ruiter

June 2011

Vanberg & Dewulf and De Scheldebrouwerij, Meer, Antwerpen, Belgium

8.0% ABV \$/750 mL

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After a couple recent months of examining some classic styles of beer, this month we turn to tasting some more recent style departures. Artisan beer taps into an ages-old technique of transforming the harvest into a great beverage, but it's as much a work of art as it is a utilitarian craft. The more you know about and appreciate the classic styles of beer, the more you can appreciate beer's artistic new directions.

Let's start with Hop Ruiter, a hoppy, Belgian beer that is a collaboration between a Belgian brewery and a legend of Belgian beer in America. Husband and wife team Don Feinberg and Wendy Littlefield founded the beer importer Vanberg & DeWulf in 1982, becoming one of the first importers to bring Belgian beer to the United States. Vanberg & DeWulf exclusively features independent, family-run breweries. In 1997, Feinberg and Littlefield founded Brewery Ommegang in Cooperstown, New York, as the first American brewery committed to solely brewing Belgian-style ales. (Duvel-Moortgat purchased the brewery from Feinberg in 2003.) Since leaving the brewery, Feinberg has kept busy on projects with the family breweries whose beer he imports, and he is proud to introduce his new strong golden ale, Hop Ruiter, brewed in collaboration with De Scheldebrouwerij.

De Scheldebrouwerij is a new brewery north of Antwerp near the border with the Netherlands. It is committed to brewing beers that are full of character; a Schelde beer might as easily include additions of coriander, blackberries, or oyster shells as it would malt and hops. Feinberg calls De Schelde "one of Belgium's most dynamic renegade breweries." Hop Ruiter is a great-tasting beer, and it is not without motives -- grudges, almost, about things Feinberg thinks the beer world has been missing over the years.

With the success of hoppy American IPAs and the excitement over bold, citrusy American hop varieties, brewers on both sides of The Pond have given birth to a new style of beer: the Belgian-style IPA. These beers are bitter, hoppy ales fermented with Belgian yeasts that add some fruitiness and spiciness. Most of the commercial examples of the style rely on American hops, which can lend notes of grapefruit, tangerine, and pine forest, but their bitterness can be overly-accentuated by the fermentation notes of certain Belgian yeasts. It's a new style of beer that brewers are still refining (the outspoken Feinberg calls some of these beers "wannabes"), and Hop Ruiter is a response that is hoppier than most Belgian beers, but that relies on herbal, earthy European noble hops used deftly in balance with De Schelde's yeast's fermentation flavors.

Feinberg has enjoyed Belgian beer for decades, and has seen the flavor profiles of beers he loved turn thin and wan as corporatization has altered certain brewers' priorities. He describes Hop Ruiter as a "drinkable Belgian-American love child, with a full, almost rustic, malty body." To Feinberg, rusticity is the soul of beers from family-run, artisanal Belgian breweries. With a not-so-subtle barb, he describes Hop Ruiter's rusticity as "specifically the fullness and funk that once characterized ales like Duvel before production increases and international distribution softened their edges and their personality."

Pour your Hop Ruiter in a tapered glass like a tulip or wine glass. Allow a billowy head to form to trap the crazy aromas of white wine, sea spray, pineapple, lime, mango, and sagebrush. Take a sip and enjoy the apricot, pepper, bitter lemon pith flavors. Then take a large swallow -- it's beer, after all -- to appreciate the vanilla-tinged yeastiness, thyme-like hops, minty heat, and full, fluffy body. The finish is long and dry, allowing malt sweetness to dissipate into herbal, medicinal hops. Unlike American hops which can add a marmalade sweetness when steeped in the cold beer (a process called dry hopping), Hop Ruiter has been dry hopped with Continental noble hop varieties to lend an almost minty, tannic woodiness.

Make sure there's some cheese handy when you drink this beer. There's some cheddar, brie, or parmigiano in your fridge that's been dreaming about this beer. Of course, a smoked duck breast, some grilled peaches with a mustard vinaigrette, or roasted garlic on crusty bread would



be phenomenal, too. Or go with Feinberg's spot-on recommendation: a spicy grilled beef salad with onions, lime juice and Thai chiles.

Tilted Smile

Uinta Brewing Co., Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

9.0% ABV \$/750 mL

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While Hop Ruiter is a unique beer within the Belgian tradition that prides itself on personality, Tilted Smile borrows from a completely different beer tradition: the Czech-German. The Bohemians were the first to develop the Pilsner beer -- in the city of Pilsn, in what is now the Czech Republic, in 1842, to be exact. This beer was a new style of beer within a context of general beer uniformity. In the central part of the Continent, beer was part of daily life, meant to be predictable and delicious. Rather than uniqueness and personality, freshness and accuracy were the key to ensuring that a brewery could sell its beer. With as many breweries in each *stadt, burg, and berg* as there were churches, local beer was the respected and reliable libation, and beer that had to travel was more expensive and less stable. The advent of artificial refrigeration and expansive transportation networks led to outsider beers being able to compete with local beers, as economies of scale and advertising established a pecking order in an expanded beer marketplace.

These also allowed for our protagonist, fair Pilsner -- bright, crisp, and zippy with bitterness -- to be brewed in larger and larger quantities in places with less robust beer traditions. By the mid-20th century, beer was being brewed in places like Mexico, Southeast Asia, and Africa, where without refrigeration beer would surely sour, as well as in America, where big business decreed that beer should be made cheaply in order to maximize profit and market share. And while, nominally, pilsner was the beer being brewed, it was gradually watered down and its hoppy character stripped away to make a beverage that more closely resembled water than the game-changing lager it had been just a hundred years earlier.

Enter American craft brewers, intent on brewing the full-flavored beers that had been brewed for centuries. Even in a place with suppressed drinking culture like Utah, quality craft brewers have thrived, brewing great beer and building a loyal craft beer fanbase. Uinta Brewing Co. (pronounced "yoo-IN-tuh" and named after a local mountain range) opened in 1993 and has expanded steadily since then, keeping its commitment to brewing quality beer and minimizing its environmental impact. In 2001, it became the first Utah business to be powered 100% by wind energy. Uinta is one of the older generation of American craft breweries, and has seen trends come and go. It recently began brewing a set of beers it calls its Crooked Line Series -- "bent beers that side-step traditional brewing techniques and ingredients." The brewery is putting its hard-fought wisdom and expertise behind some of the new American craft beer styles, such as a bourbon-barrel-aged barleywine, a strong black ale, and Tilted Smile, its Imperial Pilsner. With Tilted Smile, Uinta helps us remember why pilsner was such a good style in the first place, and why its better to amp up pilsner's flavor than to water it down.

Pour your Tilted Smile into a pilsner glass -- a glass that's fluted outward at the top -- to lift the rocky white head. Smell the bready, biscuity malts and the herby hops. On the palate, Tilted Smile is malt-forward at first, with flavors of bread and a hint of sawdust, but soon the European noble hops show off their grassy, parsley, and black pepper notes. (Noble hops are four varieties of hops native to the Czech Republic and southern Germany, prized for their even bittering and grassy, herbal aromas. Zatec (in Czech)/Saaz (in German) hops are the hallmark of a true Bohemian pilsner.) True to form, the lager yeast strain leaves a clean fermentation profile, so there is little fruit or spice lent to the beer. The finish is a bit sweet and malty, showing its American, Imperialized bravado, but the hop bitterness lingers just long enough to remind us of where this beer's roots lie.

Tilted Smile is a great partner with all foods German -- pretzels, mustards, roasted onions and potatoes, and pork. But Tilted Smile has a richer body and higher alcohol than most pilsners, so try it with a rich gratin of golden beets, or a brunch of pork belly buns, hoisin, and dim sum, finished with caramel pecan rolls.