



August 2011

Last month, we tasted beers whose flavors are driven by wood and yeast. This month, we focus on hop-driven beer -- one from a venerable American craft brewery that's been brewing bold, hoppy beers for years. The other is from a new start-up gypsy brewery from Denmark.

YuleSmith Holiday Ale (Summer 2011)

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Alesmith Brewing Company, San Diego, California, USA

8.5% ABV \$/22 oz.

Peter Zien (pronounced "zeen") was an avid homebrewer in San Diego, and in 1995, he helped open Alesmith Brewing Company, becoming the brewmaster. In the past 16 years, Alesmith has gone on a storied trajectory from Southern California start-up to hoppy beer upstart to seminal member of West-Coast-style canon. The West Coast style is one of bold beers big in flavor, hops, and alcohol. Alesmith's beers seem bigger than life -- very malty and bitter, with typical alcohol levels above 8% -- an impression further helped by the fact that they've always foregone the 12 oz. bottle in favor of 22-oz. bomber bottles and 750-mL cork and cage bottles (when not on draft). Their more "civilized" offerings, like XPA (extra pale ale) and Anvil ESB, have been less well-known than their collectible, culty, and colossal Speedway Stout (imperial stout with coffee, 12% ABV), Horny Devil (strong golden Belgian, 11.0% ABV), Grand Cru (Belgian dark, 10.5% ABV), Old Numbskull Barleywine (11.0% ABV), and Wee Heavy (Scotch ale, 11.0% ABV). Despite the extreme flavors and alcohol levels of these beers, Zien brews with a delicate hand, and each Alesmith beer has finesse. This is Alesmith's trademark elegance: restraint amidst giant flavor. And where other breweries rely on cloying malts, spicy alcohols, and searing bitterness to define their bold beers, Alesmith beers have an arc of purpose that connects nuanced malts, smooth alcohols, and welcome, bracing bitterness.

YuleSmith Summer is a classic expression of these traits. A big, double IPA out of San Diego is not unique; rather, it's more the not-so-secret handshake of the San Diego beer scene. But YuleSmith is a smooth, elegant example of the double IPA style, offering an olive branch to both the dry, harshly bitter camp and the fruity, resinous, hopjuice bombs.

Before we go any further, though, a note on names: a Yule beer for summer? And why does it call itself an Imperial/Double IPA? In the early 2000s, when West Coast brewers began to take IPAs' bitterness, malts, and alcohol "to 11," they needed a name to describe these über IPAs. Some brewers named them "Double IPAs," while others borrowed from the czarist-inspired imperial stouts and coined "Imperial IPA." Like rainmakers ending a West Coast lupulin drought, these beers became so incredibly popular so quickly that both style names were in widespread use in the craft beer industry before consensus was reached on a name. Thus, the Brewers Association diplomatically, albeit clumsily, recognizes the style of beer as Imperial/Double IPA. (The Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP), picks sides and terms the style "Imperial IPA." Ironically, Zien is San Diego's only Grand-Master-Level BJCP Judge.) Alesmith releases seasonal beers to celebrate the personality of the season, and with its Halloween-time Evil Dead Red, Christmas-time YuleSmith, Valentine's-time My Bloody Valentine, the brewery found inspiration for its summer seasonal in Independence Day, and winkingly calls the beer YuleSmith to celebrate the summer holidays. The two YuleSmith beers are in fact related: summer's is a double IPA, and winter's is an imperial red ale -- essentially a double IPA brewed with nutty, amber malts.

Pour your YuleSmith into a goblet or tulip glass with a tapered opening to concentrate the beer's bouquet. Leave room in the glass to bury your nose in it and breathe in the beautiful aromas of malty bread and hoppy orange and pine tree. These are the hallmarks of American hop varieties -- lush citrus and pine. In the case of double IPAs, the nose is a preview of the palate, and your first sip of YuleSmith will enrobe your tongue in a mouthful of piney oranges and bready honey. As you swallow, a long trail of appetizing bitterness lingers, mixing with malt and subtle alcohol notes as you breathe out. This beer isn't one-trick pony, though, and with further sipping, a plethora of other hints appear, vanish, and reappear, including caramel, lime, guava, mint, white chocolate, and an almost coffee-like bitterness. As the alcohol and bitterness build, your



palate may numb just a bit, and the sensation is not unlike a shot of bitter, sweet, minty, medicinal Fernet-Branca.

Many people think such an assertive, flavorful beer is not food-friendly, but in fact like all beer, it is. For sure, it'll completely run over delicate foods. But this beer can be a nimble partner with rich, salty, herbal foods. Go haute with lobster bisque with tangerine oil and rosemary croutons or keep it real with root beer glazed baby back ribs and salty fries; either way, it'll be a match made in heaven.

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Hoppenheimer

Xbeeriment, Copenhagen, Denmark

9.7% ABV \$/500 mL

The joys of brewing and drinking double and imperial IPAs are the American hops. They're the stars of the show. While the malts, yeast, and water are essential to the overall beer, nobody reads Double IPA Magazine for the articles. American hops are like no other other hops. A fortuitous combination of wild American *humulus lupulus* genetics, transplanted European root stock, university research, and American terroir -- soil, climate, time -- have made modern American hops the bright, flashy darlings of the hop world. These few dozen varieties encompass flavors and aromas of citrus, pine, tropical fruits, garlic, and resinous cannabis. Brewing with these hops would ruin grassy, peppery Czech pilsners and would dominate Belgian lambics. They also would skew English-style IPAs from their floral, earthy, savory domain, which they in fact did in the 1980s when brewers like Anchor, Sierra Nevada, and Bert Grant, who couldn't get the classic European hop varieties, gave birth to an American style of pale ale and IPA.

Since those nascent days of the American craft brewing renaissance, the tables have turned and now upstart European breweries are frequently brewing American-style beers, sometimes true to (new) style, sometimes interpreting quite a bit, but their siren is usually brazen American hops. This is especially happening in Scandinavia -- thirsty, uninfluenced by centuries of established brewing culture, and without an entrenched domestic wine culture competing for fermentation capacity. In the craft beer world, Denmark is most famous for Mikkeller, an avant-garde gypsy brewery that rents space at other breweries to brew its hoppy and unconventional beers. Xbeeriment has recently joined the Danish craft beer scene, brewing its bold beers at established brewery Amager Bryghus. Xbeeriment's name describes its mission -- to brew interesting beers as experiments that are outside of the norm for Northern European and Scandinavian beer drinkers. Xbeeriment was started by two Danes, Anders Østergaard and Thomas Hoelgaard, both decorated for their champion homebrews. They've kept their day jobs, which keeps them from having to brew conventional sellers to pay the bills and allows them -- and us -- to enjoy their beery empiricism.

Hoppenheimer, a Danish, 9.7%-ABV, American-style double IPA, more than qualifies as an xbeeriment. A pun on Robert Oppenheimer, the American scientist who led the Manhattan Project, Hoppenheimer boasts a nuclear blast of American hoppiness. It is, indeed, beautifully hoppy, and those citrusy, piney, and slightly oniony notes jump out of the glass. Hints of apricot from the ale yeast and sage and resinous smoke from the hops add intrigue. It all plays out upon a hypnotic mouthfeel, fluffy and bread-like from the rich-but-attenuated maltiness, suspended yeast, and fine carbonation. And at 9.7% ABV, Hoppenheimer has a warming, cinnamon finish beneath the bitterness.

When pairing Hoppenheimer with food, consider playing up both its lighter fruit notes -- orange, lime, and apricot -- with some of its earthier notes of sage, smoke, and bitterness. The salty creaminess of cheese would be great; the spicy funk of a creamy bleu cheese would be even better, and a grilled Maytag Blue cheese sandwich with sage and apricot mostarda would be divine. Hoppenheimer could also do double duty at the end of a meal, pairing nicely with dessert -- say, lemon cheesecake with some smoked almond brittle crumbled on top -- as well as providing the satiating warmth and bitterness of an Italian digestivo.