



Lucifer

February 2012

Brouwerij Het Anker, Mechelen, Antwerp, Belgium

8.0% ABV \$/750 mL

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Belgium's many flavorful and idiosyncratic beers have made the nation sacred ground for beer travelers, but unfortunately these beers fight continually for their survival. Fans of the American craft beer scene decry the stranglehold the "Big 3" American macrobrewers have on the domestic market, but the situation is no different in Belgium. In the US, Anheuser-Busch, Miller, and Coors' control about 85% of the market share, and in Belgium, it's Stella Artois, Maes Pils, and Jupiler Pils that comprise about 85% of beer sales.

In Belgium in the wake of World War II, the economics of brewing had firmly shifted from small breweries succeeding with artisanal beers to larger breweries profiting from economies of scale and heavy marketing. In an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" scenario, Belgian breweries stayed competitive by brewing beers similar to the German, Dutch, and Danish international pilsners (they were competing with beers that are no stranger to us to today -- Heineken, Amstel, Carlsberg, Beck's, and the like). However, a counter movement started in the 1970s with the brewing of Brouwerij Moortgat's Duvel, when Belgian brewers experimented with using the light yellow pilsner malts and a traditional pilsner bitterness to brew a very Belgian style ale.

With such mild ingredients, the arbiter of this recipe's flavor is the yeast strain used for the fermentation. In the case of pilsners, a neutral-tasting lager strain is selected, which stays in the background and highlights the subtle flavors of the malt and the more aggressive flavors of the hops. (True pilsners are beautiful concerti of Continental hops among the pilsner malts; international pilsners water down the presence of both the malt and the hops.) In the case of the Belgian breweries' new Trojan horse -- the Belgian golden strong ale -- a very highly attenuating ale yeast that imparts fruity and spicy flavors is used to ferment the malt sugars, which it does with gusto, leaving the beer very dry with little residual sugar. Since the flavor of these Belgian beers is so dependent upon the fermentation characteristics, the brewers of these beers frequently add extra fermentables (about 20% of the grist bill) in the form of dextrose and other simple sugars, which serve as more "food" for the yeast during fermentation without adding to the body or the color of the finished beer (this process is also practiced in wine-making, where it's called chaptalization). The fermentation of these sugars allows the yeast to contribute more flavor and increases the beer's alcohol content, adding a certain "devilish" character to these beers. Despite its imperious, malevolent name, Lucifer is a fun beer. It is meant to be very beguiling, inviting, complex, high in alcohol, and easy-drinking at the same time.

Pour your Lucifer vigorously into a tulip or snifter; a glass whose inwardly-tapering mouth will focus the nose and whose size will allow for the rocky head to build and linger. This beer is very well-carbonated, and locked inside all that white foam is a ton of aroma just waiting for you to experience it. The nose is a big whiff of yeasty bread and mushrooms, accompanied by phenolics of black pepper, smoke, and wool sweater, and set on a foundation of stone and mineral. The palate follows with biscuits drizzled with honey, with hints of candied cherry, vanilla, lemon curd, and woody kaffir lime. The beer's fruit and spice notes are focused sip after sip by the beer's high carbonation, and it's the carbonation itself that adds a sense of minerality and dryness. Some balancing hop bitterness is present, but it fades quickly off the back of the palate. Despite the high alcohol content, no booziness is present in the aftertaste, and the beer finishes dry with the aroma of honey.

Lucifer is a complex, dry, mineraly, peppery, slightly tart, golden beer that hides its considerable alcohol level. As such, it's a very versatile partner with many foods. It's got a ton of food-pairing hooks -- breadiness, fruitiness, spice, leanness, and carbonation. It's phenomenal with shellfish (its fruitiness counters the saltiness), salads (its spice garnishes the salad while its leanness won't overwhelm the veggies), and cheeses (its carbonation cuts the fat). Try Lucifer with squash-stuffed fried ravioli, Mt. Tam cheese with crackers and quince paste, or pear crisp. Or stick with the Flemish favorite of mussels steamed in -- you guessed it -- an aromatic golden ale like Lucifer.



Dolii Raptor - Aged in Calvados Barrels

Birrificio Montegioco, Montegioco, Piemonte, Italy

8.5% ABV \$/330 mL

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Birrificio Montegioco's Dolii Raptor is a barrel-aged Belgian-style strong ale that is mature and complex, yet, true to the Belgian strong ale style, it remains accessible and fun. In 2009 Montegioco brewed a batch of its Demon Hunter Belgian-style strong ale. Some of this Demon Hunter was set aside for barrel aging -- some in used barbera wine barrels and some in used calvados barrels. What went into the barrels as Demon Hunter came out a much different beer -- leaner and meaner (or, at least, more mature and more graceful); it had become Dolii Raptor (Latin for "The Barrel Thief"). It was then bottle conditioned for carbonation and further complexity.

The Dolii Raptor featured in this month's club is from the batch aged in calvados barrels. The brewery sourced the barrels from the Domaine Dupont cidery and distillery in Normandy, France. Normandy is apple country, and, not surprisingly, it's also known for its cider and its apple brandy known as calvados. Calvados is distilled from hard cider, after which it is aged in French oak barrels for periods of a few months up to several years. During this time, the brandy's spicy alcohols and fruity, apple-y flavors seep into the wood, while the oak's caramel, toast, and coconut flavors add character to the calvados. By the time the barrels are emptied, their wood staves are swollen with great, cidery, brandy flavors as well as a few airborne bacteria or yeasts that had trouble fermenting and souring something as alcoholic as calvados, but that might be happy to add some acidity and complexity to a beer, wine, or cider.

Inspired by the barrel-aged sour ales of Belgium, lots of American craft brewers are aging their beers in wood -- for sourness, for flavor of the barrels' previous occupant, or for both -- and now some intrepid European craft brewers are doing the same. In the U.S., used bourbon barrels are plentiful and cheap, and in the Bay Area, used wine barrels are pretty easy to obtain, too, hence the frequency of bourbon and/or wine flavors in our local barrel-aged beers. Enter Birrificio Montegioco, a Piemontese brewer of a Belgian-style ale looking for some other barrels to supplement the availability of local barbera wine barrels. Where Demon Hunter is a big, Belgian-style ale that finishes a bit sweet, time in the calvados barrels has left Dolii Raptor beautifully dry, graced it with the flavors of Norman apple brandies, and imparted a subtle acidity from a combination of natural airborne bacteria from both France and Italy. It's a beer that's at once satisfying and intriguing. Perhaps it's the grace and liveliness of The Barrel Thief that the Demon Hunter is in pursuit of.

Upon opening a bottle of Dolii Raptor, the aroma of apples immediately jumps forth. This beer is bottle conditioned, and because of its age and intensity, the yeast may impart a bit of a soy-sauce-like flavor, so pour the beer gently and try to leave the final centimeter or so of yeasty beer in the bottle. (If you prefer, you can pour the yeast, but it may mask some of the beer's subtleties.) Pour it into a wine glass or other inwardly-tapering glass to focus the apple-y nose. The bouquet is rich with apples and brandy, but also with banana, bubble gum, mushrooms, and aged wood. Taking a sip, you'll find your nose wasn't wrong, as more layers of apple, spirits, spice, and earth unfold. At first, it's all apples (jonagolds? empires?) and brandy. But the finish lingers, and spicy notes of black pepper and hot cinnamon mingle with oxidized notes of sherry and paraffin; cider and soft caramels are given structure by warm alcohol and an apple skin astringency. A pleasing, ever-so-slight sourness adds further complexity.

Like all beers, Dolii Raptor is great with cheese. It's particularly friendly with both the cheddar family as well as earthy cheeses. Its apple-y roundness finds harmony with cheddar's sweet-salty milkiness, and its spicy fruitiness brings life to the earthiness of camembert and robbiola. Beyond cheese, this beer would be great with roasted pork loin, caramelized root vegetables, or Vietnamese five-spice chicken. Its also just great on its own as a digestif at the end of a meal.