



August 2012

This month we turn to the alluring, complex saison style of beer. *Saison* (say-zohn) is French for “season;” the Flemish and Dutch use the word *seizeon* (pronounced say-zoon). Saisons are essentially beers of agrarian necessity. In centuries past in the fertile grain fields of what is now present-day Belgian Wallonia and northern France, farmers would use their downtime in the winter to brew beer with part of their harvest. The beer fermented in farmhouse barns and cellars with complex, farmy yeasts until the next summer, when seasonal farm laborers (*saisonniers*) would be offered the beer as hydration and wages. In eras of unsafe drinking water and a cash-poor farm economy, saison beers were essential currency for keeping the workers hydrated and the fields tended. The beers had to be low enough in alcohol to keep workers’ wits about them, and without high alcohol to preserve the beers until the summer season, bitter hops were added liberally to help ward off contamination. Brewed with barley supplemented with whatever grain was at hand, and often spiced subtly with a farmer’s secret blend, the beers’ only real commonality was an earthy, farmy rusticity and a refreshing, dry finish.

With the advent of a more mechanized, efficient farm economy and safer drinking water, in the 20th century saisons became less of a necessity and became much rarer in Belgium. During that time, the beers’ alcohol levels crept up from the 2-4% abv range to the 6-8% abv range. Only about a dozen breweries in Belgium brew the style today, concentrated primarily in the province of Hainaut, where a name-protected appellation is being petitioned to the Belgian and EU governments. I’m not sure how name-protection will be interpreted or enforced in the United States, where hundreds of craft breweries are now brewing saisons, both seasonally and year-round. While it’s unclear how the name of the style will be affected, at least the survival of these beautiful beers seems assured. With this month’s two West-Coast selections, we celebrate summer on the farm and drink to a resurrected beer style.

Cheers,

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

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Honey Saison

Almanac Beer Company, San Francisco, California, USA

4.8% ABV \$/12 oz.

Almanac Beer Co. is known for delicious, elegant beers that are terroir-driven and designed to pair with food. Their first four releases have been a tad pricy and esoteric, though, so co-owners and brewers Damian Fagan and Jesse Friedman have just released Honey Saison and Extra Pale Ale, the first two beers of their “California Table Beer” series, designed to be more accessible and affordable. The beers are easy-drinking session beers (abv around or below 5%) packaged in 12-ounce bottles and available year-round. Both are fermented with a Belgian saison yeast, with its characteristic lemony, peppery tartness, and each shows an earthiness reminiscent of the yeast’s wilder, farmy past. California resonates in each beer, too, in the form of added Blossom Bluff mandarins in the Extra Pale Ale and Marshall Farms honey in the Honey Saison. The beers also ruminate on oak cuts during fermentation to gain soft hints of oak.

Adding honey to a beer can be a tricky proposition. Honey is 98% fermentable (barley malts tend to be only 75-85% fermentable), with the other 2% being a cocktail of natural flavors, aromas, and bee scruff, as well as natural bacteria and yeasts that can turn a beer wild and sour. Brewers have to balance the need to heat the honey to kill off its wilder side without boiling off all the great honey aromas. For their Honey Saison, Almanac adds the honey right at the very end of the wort boiling process, relying on the wort’s residual heat to lightly pasteurize the honey without driving off all of its delicate flavors and aromas. Because the honey is added prior to fermentation, the sugars are fermented completely and the resulting beer is dry and devoid of honey sweetness. In the finished beer, a delicate memory of floral, vanilla-y honey swims among the saison’s other complex flavors.

In the glass, Honey Saison is effervescent and straw-colored with a white cap of a head. The nose is complex and rustic, with bread, vanilla, oak, lemon-lime, sharp-nutty Swiss cheese,



and hints of crisp vegetables (celery, shallots). In what is one of my favorite curveballs a beer can throw, the bouquet -- savory and satisfying on its own -- turns out to be false advertising for what is a remarkably clean palate. Hints of umami, candle wax, oak, and sun-dried tomato linger amidst a snappy bitterness, but the flavor is dominated by a rustic, grainy, crusty bread note that sweeps the palate clean for the the next sip. The beer's body is defined by a structure of carbonation and some drying tannins from barley husk and oak. This tasty saison is essentially a clean, easy-drinking, dry beer that's dolled-up with heady perfume. It's perfect for a day in the fields -- aromatic and inviting, but easy and thirst-quenching at the core.

Saisons are the anchor of some of the easiest and most-rewarding beer and food pairings. Brewer and beer writer Garret Oliver calls saisons "promiscuous" when in the presence of food, and as long as chocolate and charred, grilled red meats are not on the menu, it's hard to go wrong with a saison at the table. Almanac recommends serving Honey Saison alongside stir-fried Chinese food, crispy fried chicken, or rich triple cream cheeses. These are often dinner-y dishes, though, and it'd be a shame not to enjoy this beer at lunchtime, too -- say, with an arugula salad with tomatoes, artichoke hearts, and feta cheese.

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Seizoen

Logsdon Organic Farmhouse Ales, Hood River, Oregon, USA

7.5% ABV \$/750 ml

In April 2011, Logsdon Organic Farmhouse Ales released its first beer, Seizoen Bretta, just in time for Portland's Cheers to Belgian Beers festival. The beer won the People's Choice category. Since then, the tiny, farmhouse brewery has won a gold medal at the World Beer Cup (for the sour, fruit beer Peche 'n' Brett) and another People's Choice award at Cheers to Belgian Beers in 2012. Brewers Dave Logsdon and Charles Porter brew their rustic beers in a 1940s-era barn on the farm property Logsdon purchased in the 1980s. Logsdon has made a name in the craft brewing industry three times, now: first, when he co-founded and was the first brewer at Full Sail Brewing Company; second, when he left Full Sail and co-founded Wyeast yeast laboratory, which is one of the two most successful laboratories that culture and sell yeast to professional breweries; and third, when he installed a brewery on his orchard and highland cattle farm in the Hood River Valley and opened Logsdon Organic Farmhouse Ales.

Logsdon has unparalleled beer pedigree. In addition to using his expertise and land to brew exquisite beers, he's growing organic hops, launching a lambic program (with a wooden barrel he's been cultivating unique *Brettanomyces* lambic yeast in for over a decade), and, among other things old-school and Belgian, importing rare heirloom sour cherry tree stock from an orchard in East Flanders to graft onto his orchard. (Once the USDA quarantine period ends and the stock matures in a couple years, we can expect some Logsdon schaarbeekse kriek beers.)

While he and Porter experiment with and refine their exciting, sour, fruited, and wild beers, the starting point for tasting Logsdon beers is their Seizoen. It's an amazing saison with endless complexity from the fermentation (as might be expected from a yeast scientist, the beer is fermented by 4 different Belgian ale and saison strains of yeast), but at a hefty 7.5% abv, it has a supple maltiness that softens the edges of all that tartness, minerality, fruit, and spice from the yeasts. The beer is bottle-conditioned with a splash of pear juice. The live yeast consume the pear juice and create carbonation and some final fermentation flavors; the CO₂ and flavors are trapped inside the bottle, carbonating the beer and giving you the opportunity to pour all of its delicate yeasty flavors into your glass.

Logsdon Seizoen pours a hazy, deep gold color capped by a thick, white head that lasts and lasts. Aromas of peaches, lime, heather, grass, and bubble gum burst forth. Taking a sip, the silky, malty mouthfeel is punctuated by carbonation, and the palate turns savory, lingering with hints of pepper, scallion, tomato, and bitter olives. Hop bitterness rests at the back of the tongue, waiting to make the next sip taste sweeter and malty at first, before it too fades to a dry, minerally bitterness. Enjoy it with a bowl of garlicky steamed mussels, mushroom or pancetta eggs Benedict, or some face-up peach halves broiled with melty, bubbly robiola cheese on top.