



**October 2012**

This month, we're taking a taste of pale ale. Recently traveling to Burton-On-Trent in England, I immersed myself in pale ale's past with proper pints of Marston's Pedigree. Pale Ale's present is right in our backyard, with Bear Republic's fine double IPA. An epic "doubling" of Bear Republic's Racer 5, this is only the second time Racer X has been bottled, the first being a limited run during SF Beer Week this past February, when the bottles were snapped up quickly. Enjoy these two beers that share a past but couldn't taste more different from each other.

*Cheers!*

*Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone*

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**Pedigree**

**Marston, Thompson, & Evershed, Plc., Burton Upon Trent, England, UK**

**4.5% ABV \$/500 mL**

Marston's Pedigree is a beer caught between the tides of time and fashions of beer history. A cocktail of technology, agriculture, politics, and geology have mixed together to create a beer that is an important time capsule of English beer. Pedigree has terroir, capturing the essence of the English Midlands by framing a bouquet of earthy, spicy English hops and a backbone of biscuity-tasting heirloom malt against a backdrop of the famed "Burton Snatch."

An anachronism of a name, the Burton Snatch is an aroma from the water of city of Burton-Upon-Trent. The area's well water passes through layers of sandstone, and on its way to the surface it picks up lots of calcium sulfate, otherwise known as gypsum. Less known for its mineral contributions to beer, gypsum finds its way more commonly into plaster of Paris (named after a large gypsum source in Paris) and drywall (sometimes known as gyp board). Different from the smooth, silky affects of London's high carbonate water, Burton's high sulfate water leans out beers and offers them a sharp, mineral edge. Some beers, like Marston's, retain a bouquet of that gypsum, marrying earthy, fruity fuggles hops with an air of . . . construction site. I'm certainly not doing it any favors with that description, but many beers have less-than-lyrical attributes (cheesy and horse blanket come to mind). In Marston's case, "plastery" is apt and makes for unique beer and deliciously savory time travel over to England in the mid-1800s.

Porter was the king of beers in England in the 1700s, but as the Industrial Revolution brought coal and coke out of the ground and into factories and foundries, one of its applications was in malting. By the end of the eighteenth century, coke allowed maltsters to heat kilns and roasting drums indirectly and at lower temperatures that could more delicately dry the malt -- rather than roast and color it -- after its wet germination. With lighter colored malts available to them, English brewers brewed lighter colored beers, and these pale ales began to catch on. In London, brewers were accustomed to brewing beers whose character came from dark malts, but the calcium carbonate in their water rendered the new pale beers soft and mild. In the north, especially in the River Trent's industrial city of Burton, the water chemistry was perfect for a beer whose tawny colored malts showcased character from the bitterness and bouquet of hops.

The story of India Pale Ale is well known, with Burton-Upon-Trent fueling the thirsty British Empire with bright, crisp, hoppy beers equipped with enough antiseptic hop bitterness and alcohol to keep the most sea-tossed barrel bright and tasty upon arrival in foreign lands. But a variety of complications have led to the style's replacement as Her Majesty's ale. For one, brewers learned in the mid-1800s how to "Burtonize" water. By adding the proper dose of gypsum to the brewing liquor prior to mashing, brewers in London and elsewhere could brew the clean, balanced, hop-driven beers of Burton, and the intensity of the minerality and plastery aromas could be dialed down. With empire and several wars to pay for, Parliament grew dependent on the "beer duty," ever-escalating and ever-vexing to brewers and drinkers. This duty taxes beers at higher rates based on higher alcohol content. Tax-dodging, lower alcohol beers such as milds and bitters grew popular, which brought alcohol levels down to a now-common range of 2.5% - 4.5% abv. By the 20th century, many pale ales had lost much of their regional identity, bold hoppiness, and sturdy alcohol, and bitters and milds still dominate the pub landscape today. Less bitter than pale ales but more bitter than their cousins the milds, bitters retain a sense of balance and a



happy marriage of malt and hops. Today, almost every English brewery brews a variety of bitters (which is undoubtedly a boon -- they're beautiful beers), and the dominance of Burton's pale ales, with their assertive hops, fortifying alcohol, and Burton Snatch, has waned.

Today, Burton-Upon-Trent is a shadow of its former self, a post-industrial town whose primary employers are multi-national breweries who employ as many computers as people. Marston's is a hold-over from Burton's heyday, and, while not-unblemished, has lived to tell the tale. In a time before bright, stainless steel tanks, Marston's championed the Burton Union System, fermenting in great chains of barrels linked via a series of overflowing and underletting pipes. During fermentation, yeast and beer billow up and out of the barrels, beer mixes among the union, and natural currents and self-propelled yeast selection reinvigorate the fermentation. To this day, Marston's Pedigree is fermented in these wooden unions and its best yeast is culled from the overflow collection trays for use in the next batch of beer. Marston's still employs its own full-time cooper to maintain its vast battery of wooden barrels (all of which are "neutral" wood that doesn't impart wood flavor to the beer.) Pedigree is not Marston's oldest beer -- it was first brewed in 1952 -- but its technique and flavor harken back to when Burton ale was king.

Make sure to take a smell of your Pedigree as soon as you open it, as well as right after you pour it into a pub glass. Notice the mineral, savory, plastery aromas of that famous brewing water. The beer is resplendent with orange-amber hue, bright bubbles, and white foamy head. The bouquet, beneath that plastery, gypsum smell, is apple-y and cidery, and the biscuity Maris Otter malts practically jump out of the glass. A sip of the beer is a balanced greeting, with aromatic and herbaceous hops tempered by bready, biscuity, butter toffee malt flavors. But as the beer lingers and warms in your mouth and as aromas waft to your nose after swallowing, a conservative drama whispers of baked apples and pie crust, earthy sulphur, and hoppy bitterness, all delivered with precision on a mineral, taut, stiff upper lip. The body is lush and lean at the same time, like buttered biscuits whose bottoms are just a bit burned. From the bottle, it may have more carbonation than an English cask-conditioned ale fan would prefer, but it's a pleasant fizziness that makes the beer's subtle aromas blossom on the palate.

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### **Racer X**

**Bear Republic Brewing Company, Healdsburg, California, USA**

**8.3% ABV \$/22 oz**

Fast forward to today. The Burton Snatch is a colloquialism of the past. Brewers add salts to recreate the water of famous brewing cities. 3.5% abv bitters rule British pubs and IPAs are quaint oddities. The West Coast of the US has taken the IPA style in aggressive new directions, with a veritable hoppy arms race pushing bitterness levels ever higher. This is a post-apocalyptic dawn of beers that taste like bitter medicine, reminding us that we shouldn't have forgotten about British balance and sensibility. Right? Wrong. Bear Republic's Racer X isn't anything a Burton brewer in the 1800s could have ever imagined, but it's still a great pale ale. While it's north of a hundred bitterness units, its malt is through the roof, too. It's absolutely a bitter beer, but that bitterness is perceived more gently because the beer is extremely malty. The beers are almost identical in color; Brewmaster Rich Norgrove uses English crystal malts in Racer X that impart the same biscuity, caramel, butter toffee, and slightly raisiny flavors as in Pedigree. The intensity of Racer X doesn't come from lack of balance, it comes from the fact that everything in it -- malt, hops, alcohol, viscosity, aroma -- is ratcheted up to 11. It's a big, bold, American double IPA that is fueled by US hop varieties, and not just the citrusy, piney ones of the 1980s and '90s, but also the newer, more tropical, mango-y, melon-y hops being bred today.

Racer X hides a monster of a beer behind an amber-orange veneer and thin veil of off-white foam. Before you can even touch the glass to your lips, the tidal wave of tropical and citrus aroma is cresting over you. Malty cinnamon and caramel apple are being carried along, but this wave is all about big orange, grapefruit, mango, and peach aromas. The wave crashes down on your tongue with a whipcrack of piney, resinous bitterness and powerful, leathery malts. On the aftertaste, floral aromas and delicate clove and bubblegum mingle while warming alcohols numb and buzz the back of your throat.