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This month we toast two young SoCal breweries. Brouwerij West looks east to Belgium for inspiration while El Segundo follows the West-Coast hop beacon. Though very different from each other, together they comprise a snapshot of LA's burgeoning craft brewing scene as it hones its hops and captures the mysteries of Belgian beer.

Prost!

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

Blond Ale

Brouwerij West, Palos Verdes, California, USA

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5.5% ABV \$/500 ml

Brouwerij West comprises the team of Brian Mercer and Nick Brown, two Belgian beer aficionados who started their brewery in the summer of 2010. (In Flanders, *brouwerij* is pronounced it "brow-er-ey," but Mercer and Brown keep it simple in the US and just pronounce it "brewery.") Brown had worked at Rubicon Estate Winery in Napa Valley before meeting Mercer, a homebrewer from LA who had been obsessively brewing Belgian-style beers for years. A former professional photographer, Mercer's respect for visual arts is manifested in Brouwerij West's label art. For each beer label, the brewery commissions an illustrator or a painter, giving him or her creative freedom to come up with the label. The labels are limited to one printing, and when the brewery is running low on a particular beer's label, they commission another artist to create that beer's next label. *LA Weekly* journalist Lenika Cruz has written that these one-off labels, more gig art than marketing, are "bucking the growing sense that objects are hyper-disposable."

Mercer's first foray into the professional brewing industry was as a vendor of Belgian candi sugar. After years of trying to brew beers with an ever-elusive Belgian finish and finesse, Mercer had a hunch it had to do with candi sugar, an ingredient common to Belgian ales, and he traveled to Belgium to investigate. His eureka moment was when he learned that the candi sugar in his favorite beers -- with their full flavor and light, dry, delicate finish -- was actually a beet-sugar-based invert-sugar syrup, rather than the rock candy he had been fermenting in his beers at home. He became the first US importer of real Belgian candi sugar, and to this day uses it as an important ingredient in many of Brouwerij West's beers.

West's Blond Ale is not one of them, however, as its original gravity and final alcohol level are both moderate enough that Mercer and Brown don't find additional fermentables to be necessary. Mercer calls West's Blond Ale a table beer, which is any type of low-alcohol beer that complements, rather overwhelms, the family meal -- invigorating rather than dominating food, palates, and minds (of the parents *and* the children). Table beers are sensible, civilized, and delicious. As a table beer, Blond Ale's malt bill is called upon to nimbly flavor the beer, and it is restrained enough that no candi sugar is necessary to keep the beer dry and lean.

Mercer and Brown had always planned on bringing Belgium to the US. After abandoning plans to brew the beer in Belgium, they became gypsy brewers, brewing at breweries throughout California (this batch of Blond Ale was brewed in San Jose at Hermitage Brewing Company). Just like the Belgian brewers they look up to, Mercer and Brown strive to brew original beers, relying on detail-oriented brewing and just a few, simple ingredients to create masterful, complex beers. The only malt in their beers is pale, untoasted base malt. To develop deeper color and toasty, cocoa flavors in beers like their dubbel and quadrupel, they use dark candi sugar. They hop sparingly and rely on the herbal hints and angularity of German noble varieties rather than the lusty, fruitiness of US hops. They eschew the use of spices, instead preferring to let their flavorful Belgian yeasts provide their mysterious hints of spice, fruit, and earth. Finally, their beers are conditioned in the bottle, waiting for you to pry the lid off and unlock the fresh bouquet of fermentation flavors.

As Brouwerij West's Blond Ale pours into your glass, it puffs up a lacy white froth above the hazy, light golden beer. A constant parade of bubbles flits to the surface of the beer. The aroma is an instagram slideshow that bounces from bananas to freshly cut grass to apricots to wool sweaters to a rocky shoreline battered by sea spray. On the palate, it is herbaceous, malty,



briny, and tart all at once. The beer's dry finish and slightly soapy bitterness, hallmarks of Belgian blond and farmhouse ales, are courtesy of European hops mingling with the beer's mineral water and spicy, highly-attenuating Belgian yeast.

Try it with a *salade Niçoise* or *pinzimonio* with herb-and-olive-oil dip. This beer is also built for soft cheeses, whether an herbed *chèvre*, *fromage blanc* spread on crusty bread, or stinky, runny *La Tur* or *Red Hawk*. It would also be a pretty unbeatable partner with fried chicken.

Two 5 Left Double IPA

El Segundo Brewing Company, El Segundo, California, USA *Copyright Rich Higgins, 2013.*

8.2% ABV \$/22 oz

From a beer whose flavor comes from small quantities of simple ingredients, we move to a muscular beer with such extravagant use of ingredients that, the brewery admits, it "borders on lunacy." In the Los Angeles area, just up the PCH from Palos Verdes lies El Segundo, a city in the shadow of Los Angeles International Airport. El Segundo Brewing Co. owner and brewmaster Rob Croxall homebrewed for years in his home, and his cute, blue house is part of the brewery's logo and is memorialized in El Segundo's *Blue House Pale Ale* and *Blue House IPA*. But for naming the hoppy, malt monster that is *Two 5 Left Double IPA*, Croxall's muse was the origin of the jumbo jets that thunder overhead and rattle El Segundo: runway *Two 5 Left* at LAX.

In 2010, Croxall left a successful but unfulfilling aerospace career to attend the UC Davis Master Brewers Program and take his homebrewing pro. He opened El Segundo Brewing Co. in 2011, forging a new brewery with bold, brash beers, and having fun while doing so. His career switch has enabled him to smile and say, "Hey, this is fun, this is great," everyday on the job. He does all the brewing, packaging, and purchasing, and even staffs the tasting room. For sales help, Croxall brought on local beer guru Tom Kelley, a Certified Cicerone and the general manager of Santa Monica's famed *Library Alehouse*. Within two quick years, El Segundo has neared production capacity, and is eyeing the purchase of a canning line.

Hops are the primary source of Croxall's fun and his beers' boldness. He's obsessed with the flavor and aroma of "those glorious flowers," not just their bitterness. For *Two 5 Left*, he brews with *Cascade* and *Chinook* hops for their classic aromas of pine and grapefruit, and also imbues the beer with tropical aromas from *Citra* and *Simcoe*, the current darlings of the American hop crop. The beer's bouquet is intensely floral and fruity, but is also grounded by subtle aromas of onion and marijuana, American hops' more savory side. Whereas many "single" IPAs can hide their malts underneath a blanket of hops, the higher alcohol and bigger body of Double IPAs require a sturdy malt backbone that's hard to hide. Many hop haters who dislike bitter pilsners and IPAs find that Double IPAs, despite their even-higher level of bitterness, have enough body, silkiness, and residual sugar -- courtesy of a rich, breadly malt bill -- to tame the bitterness. The beer, for all its heady hoppiness, showcases malty strata of bread, malt, biscuit, Graham cracker, honey, and caramel.

Two 5 Left pours a tawny orange beneath a white head and ample carbonation. The bouquet is dominated by beautiful American hops, towering with grapefruit, guava, and lavender alongside a savory hint of scallion and marijuana. Smells of roses and honey are also present, promising that this double IPA is about more than just hops -- the rose scent is an indicator of the beer's high alcohol content, and the honey and bread crust aromas are driven by a huge malt bill. Taking a sip, the beer delivers a whip crack of bitterness but immediately drizzles it with flavors of caramel, golden raisin chutney, and piney hop resins. Hop bitterness returns in the aftertaste, drying out the beer and duking it out with malt one last time. This beer is like a tip-toeing elephant: a behemoth of flavor, but with incredible balance and grace.

For food pairing, crack open a bottle and find your nearest slab of *Fiscalini cheddar*. Then, for the rest of the bottle, make the perfect sandwich. Build on some harmony -- the beer's maltiness loves bread, and the hops are great with herbs and sharp aromatics like onion, garlic, ginger, and horseradish. Then play off some counterpoint, like allowing the maltiness to mellow out the saltiness of condiments and the acidity of pickles. A spicy *bánh mì* or corned beef with horseradish and pickled onions would be heavenly with *Two 5 Left*.