



July 2011

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This month, we turn to two big beers from American brewers who brew at others' breweries. This practice, known traditionally as contract brewing, has long been a less expensive way for brewers to start a brewing company or to increase production capacity. Much great beer has been contract brewed -- Brooklyn Brewery beer was originally brewed in Utica, Terrapin beer was brewed in Atlanta, some Elysian beer is brewed at New Belgium -- but often breweries enter contracting hesitantly or get out of contract brewing when financially possible in order to increase their beer's perceived authenticity.

With great numbers of new craft breweries opening in the past few years, many new breweries contract brew some or all of their beer (in 2009, as many as 200 of the 1600 American brewing companies contracted, according to the Brewers Association), and many are re-termining their contractor status. Nowadays, rather than just phoning it in to the production facility, there are "partner brewers," like Almanac Brewing Co., who cultivate a positive relationship and are extremely hands-on in the brewing process. And some, like Pretty Things, call themselves "gypsy brewers," playing up the idea of the peripatetic artist who can't be convinced to put down roots.

Summer 2010

Almanac Beer Company, San Francisco, California, USA

8.0% ABV \$/750 mL

Almanac Beer Co. was started in the summer of 2010, and in the past year, they've brewed just one beer: Summer 2010. They've focused all of their efforts on this one, beautiful beer in an attempt to capture the terroir of the Bay Area. Almanac's two co-founders, Jesse Friedman and Damian Fagan, spent years homebrewing 5-gallon batches inspired by the bountiful produce at farmers markets. After a time, they decided to quit their day jobs and open Almanac Beer Co. to share great local produce and beer together with restaurants and consumers. In their words, they "brew farm-to-barrel seasonal ales to be enjoyed alongside the seasonal cuisine of the Bay Area."

In addition to their tireless homebrewing experiments, Friedman and Fagan bring valuable pedigree to Almanac. Fagan's elegant artistry adorns the beer labels, and Friedman's experience in the beer-and-food world has helped them make connections (and sales) with the Bay Area's top-level chefs. Friedman is the organizer, enthusiast, critic, and photographer behind BeerAndNosh.com, the popular beer and food blog. (Since opening Almanac, he's had to curtail his blogging now that he's the owner of a brewery. There are many regulations that regulate and restrict beer manufacturers' advertising/writing about their beers outside of their venues.)

The recipe for Summer 2010 was developed with a specific fruit in mind: blackberries. Friedman and Fagan fell in love with the berries of family-owned Sebastopol Berry Farm and knew that they wanted to capture the essence of the berry harvest with this beer. They found brewing equipment, barrel-aging space, and willing visionaries at Drake's Brewing Co. in San Leandro, and formalized a partnership with Drake's to brew and age Summer 2010. In June, Friedman and Fagan brewed a batch of golden ale and fermented with a strong golden Belgian ale yeast strain (think Duvel). A few weeks later, into empty red wine barrels went the beer and 250 pounds of Sebastopol marionberries, ollalieberries, boysenberries, and Cherokee berries. There they fermented, aged, and matured for eleven months while beer yeast, plus whatever wine yeasts residing in the oak barrels, munched away at the fruit and leftover grain sugars. This dried the beer out by reducing the amount of residual sugar, and imparted complex winery, oaky, fruity flavors. Then, in June 2011, Friedman and Fagan brewed a non-barrel-aged batch of golden ale, hopped it with tangerine-tasting American Citra hops, and blended it with all the barrel-aged beer. Barrel-aged beers are commonly blended with some younger beer to soften the acidity, tannins, and oak notes of the aged beer. As they sell Summer 2010, they're currently tasting the fruits of 2011 to formulate their next beer: Summer 2011 (rumor has it they're leaning toward stone fruit).

They look forward to a time when they can release a beer each season to celebrate the flavors of the Bay Area. Their investment in cooperage (the oak barrels) and the available barrel



space at Drake's may keep them brewing there for a little while, but as part of the new school of American gypsy craft brewers, they're not tied down to a specific brewery (though surely part of their terroir is from Drake's Barrel Room).

Pour your Summer 2010 into a goblet or wine glass -- anything with a tapered-mouth to focus the bouquet. The golden malts take on a peach hue from the purple-red juice of the berries and the red wine color of the barrels. The aroma is bursting with fruity citrus, berry, and apricot aromas, as well as with coconut, lavender, and earthy sherry and heather from the wood and oxidation. On the palate, all the aromas are reinforced with flavors of vanilla, oak, peach pit, leather, rosé wine, and hop bitterness. The flavor of toasted oak is dominant throughout, simultaneously softening the beer's acidity and adding a firm structure in combination with the plentiful carbonation. Almanac recommends allowing this beer to play off the lightness of salads and fish, to cut the richness of creamy cheeses and rich, gamey meat, or to allow it to harmonize with bready fruit desserts like cobblers and tarts. These are all great pairings, and I'd add oysters with mignonette or Mexican-style grilled corn on the cob with lime-crema to the list. Or get in the Almanac spirit and embrace the season with some Sebastopol blackberries with chevre.

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Baby Tree

Pretty Things Beer & Ale Project, Somerville, Massachusetts, USA

9.0% ABV \$/22 oz.

Pretty Things Beer & Ale Project was started by husband-and-wife team Dann and Martha Paquette in 2008. Dann had brewed for 16 years in New England and England, and was ready to brew his own beers and put his own spin on the business. Martha has helped Pretty Things in almost every capacity, not least of which is, as Dann says, keeping her day job and "making an honest living," which has helped support the brewery in its infancy. Pretty Things beer has been brewed at three different breweries, most recently at Buzzards Bay Brewing Co. in Westport, MA. Buzzards Bay has allowed Dann to brew his beers himself, from start to finish, so that his beers are completely "from" Pretty Things, rather than Buzzards Bay beers with Pretty Things labels.

Calling Pretty Things a Beer & Ale *Project* is Dann's wink at his gypsy brewer status, and he is proud of the freedom it allows him to come up with unique beers and to add quirky personality to them. His beers are bold and full of rustic flavor, and they include a hoppy, grassy, spicy Belgian-style saison, a Yorkshire-style dark ale (fermented in "Yorkshire Squares," uniquely-shaped fermenters that allow for the beer partially to separate into different chambers and create different flavors than occur in contemporary fermenters), and Baby Tree Belgian-style quadrupel.

Each Pretty Things beer has depth and complexity, but Dann is quick to steer us away from beer snobbery. He reminds us that "these beers are for fun, not for display! Our beers are not precious jewels, they are happy peasants! Their motto is 'Good Time Artisanal Beers': hold them to it!" To keep things informal, Dann and Martha celebrate eccentric inspiration and draw eclectic artwork for the beers. Baby Tree commemorates a Yorkshire local's backyard tree that is adorned with rejected baby dolls; Dann calls it "fantastic" and "creepy." Baby Tree is both a serious and a very casual, drinkable Belgian-style quad. Sure, a Belgian quad is a big beer, complex by its very nature, but that's the Pretty Things way -- brew a beer with a lot of flavor and nuance, but keep it dry and drinkable, not syrupy or loaded with spices.

Baby Things pours into your snifter or wine glass a rich brown color. On the nose are notes of chocolate, plums, port, cola, and leather. On the palate are more developed flavors of plum -- 40 pounds of dried plums were added to the kettle, allowing them to steep their rich, dark stone fruit flavor into the beer. Because of the dryness of the finish, the roasted malts taste more cocoa-y than chocolatey. Some higher, warming alcohols are present, and contribute to a whisper of wine-soaked prunes. The mouthfeel is rich and full bodied, but without being cloying. Rich, dark flavors are the key to this beer's best food pairings: try it with a creamy, blue cheese with cherry preserves or seared duck breast with a balsamic reduction. To highlight the dark fruit tones of this beer, try it with a warm cherry cobbler or oatmeal chocolate-covered-raisin cookies.