



December 2011

**Noel de Calabaza**

**Jolly Pumpkin Artisan Ales, Dexter, Michigan, United States**

**9.0% ABV    \$/750 mL**

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Jolly Pumpkin has been brewing delightful sour beers for nearly a decade. Owner and Brewmaster Ron Jeffries was ahead of his time in 2004 when he opened a little brewery in a suburb of Ann Arbor and dedicated it entirely to the brewing and barrel aging of sour beers. Craft brewing is a poster child of the artisanal and slow food zeitgeist, and recently sour and barrel-aged beers have become almost de rigueur side project for American craft breweries. Jolly Pumpkin receives credit for brewing ales of Belgian bent, but while Jeffries's beers are sour, that's not what makes them Belgian-style. Belgian brewers eschew notions of style, preferring to brew beers that speak to them and to their drinkers, not to the parameters of style guidelines. This spirit of individuality and caprice is embodied by the Jolly Pumpkin offerings, which include beers of singular identity, none of which can really be pinned down into a specific style. Those who think Jeffries looks only to Belgium for inspiration have it wrong -- among the diversity of Belgian beers is a broad category of sour beers. But the Germans and the English have their sours, too, even though they may stay under the radar. Berliners and Sachsen enjoy lactic-ly sour Berliner weisses and goeses; across the English Channel, the Brits have enjoyed barrel-aged old ales for centuries with noticeable tartness, wooly, and fruit flavors from the wild yeast, *Brettanomyces*. Jeffries's individuality is interpreted differently by each of his flavorful beers, and they all share a common wealth of complexity and sourness.

Within the pantheon of Belgian sours is a style -- relatively unheralded by American beer geeks -- known as Flanders brown (certainly more prosaic than poetic in name). This style is soured in stainless steel tanks or neutral wood primarily by lactic-acid-producing bacteria (the same critters that sour pickles, yogurt, and sourdough bread), resulting in a brown beer with incredible brightness of flavor and often austere tartness. This style, perhaps, is the closest parallel to Noel de Calabaza. Contrary to many Belgian sour beers, Flanders browns retain their directness of flavor by not confusing it with flavor from wooden barrels. Barrels and large wooden beer foedres, with their woody, fruity, wild flavors, are the stuff of complex Flanders reds (think Rodenbach) and the Payottenland's funky lambics (and English stock ales, too). Most of Jolly Pumpkin's beers are driven by a bracing tartness, simple and direct on its own, but one that adds savory complexity to the overall experience. Noel de Calabaza has seen time in oak, but something in the breezes of Michigan, the water of Dexter, and the terroir of Jolly Pumpkin's barrel room has kept Jeffries's barrels free of the petri dish of funk that defines other styles of sour beers. As a result, Jolly Pumpkin's beers share a bright acidity that is reinterpreted delicately time and again through the fermentations of pale, crystal, toasted, and chocolate malts and varying levels of alcohol. Noel de Calabaza is no exception, as it draws nuance from a delicate interplay of fermented sugars, wood, alcohol, and acidity, not unlike the essence of a fine wine.

Drink your Noel de Calabaza between 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Too cold, and the nuanced flavor will be muted; too warm, and the acidity and carbonation will bloom and dominate. Pour the beer into a wine glass or other glass with inwardly-tapering walls to concentrate the aroma. Its color is the reddish brown of almond skin. Scents of meyer lemon, yeast, and soy sauce poke through the thin white head and waft out of the glass. At first taste, the flavor is sour, savory, and minerally, a bit like salty lassi and carbonated water. But almost immediately, the tartness gives way to notes of cocoa, figs, maple syrup on toast, and melted cheddar cheese. The finish is cracker-dry and lingers with just a few fleeting aromas of cocoa, spice, and malt. After a few sips, some hop bitterness becomes apparent. The beer is quite effervescent, and the minerally, carbon dioxide sting on your tongue -- not to mention the tartness -- leaves you thirsty for the next sip. It's a remarkably interesting beer, rolling through snapshots of sour, savory, and sweet. It's a beery suite with several brief movements in each sip. This beer is a great aperitif. Pair it with a platter of pretzels, mustard, cornichons, salame, and a nutty or buttery cheese: gouda, cheddar, or camembert would all work wonderfully.



## **Nordic Rye**

**Beer Here, Copenhagen, Denmark**

**8.0% ABV    \$/500 mL**

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You've heard the story before: Scandinavian homebrewer wins awards for iconoclastic and American-style craft beers that challenge the European beer status quo; homebrewer goes pro; makes name for himself as an iconoclastic brewer of beers with flavor and personality; these beers challenge local notions of beer and are greeted enthusiastically in the United States. This time, the character is zany and talented Christian Skovdal Andersen, who helped opened the Danish brewery Ølfabrikken in 2004, and now helms his own brewery, Beer Here.

Beer Here's mantra (as translated by Google, at least) is "Don't waste your thirst on small beer," and its mission is to brew flavorful beer that bends known conventions and styles. We've heard that before, but this time it's resulted in beers such as Beelzebub, a tripel that gives devilish hangovers, an Easter beer inspired by the logic that Jesus rose from the dead because he wanted a beer, and a Milk Stout that, if traditionally nourishing enough for nursing mothers, is certainly healthy enough for the rest of us.

Most of Beer Here's beers stay on their home side of the Atlantic, but some occasionally make it to the US, and I'm excited to see some make it as far west as California. You have in your hands a bottle of Nordic Rye, Beer Here's "Modern Scandinavian Farmhouse Ale," brewed with barley, rye, and oats. The rye malts add astringency and a peppery spice on the back palate; the oats add a silky creaminess. The beer is inspired by *godtøl*, the warming, flavorful "good ale" or "good beer" brewed on Danish farms for special occasions. Up until the 20th century, most beer was low in alcohol by necessity, and among those who drank it were laborers seeking nourishment while toiling in fields and factories. *Godtøl*, on the other hand, was brewed with more malt and fermentables, and was saved for celebrations during which its high alcohol content wouldn't interfere with work. The alcohol creep of many beers has only occurred in the last 75 years, since safe, affordable drinking water has become publicly subsidized and the non-alcoholic beverage industry has proliferated, which has relegated beer to being more of a social, celebratory beverage than before. Nordic Rye has a foot in both worlds -- rustic, farmhouse brewing and the contemporary, high-alcohol craft beer movement. The beer was lent the pedigree of both past and present, as it was originally developed with help and encouragement from the late, great beer expert Michael Jackson ("The one with two gloves," he used to call himself) for inclusion in his Rare Beer Club.

Nordic Rye pours a tootsie-roll-brown color in your glass. It caps itself with a soft head of foam that lingers well. On the nose are aromas of caramel, pepper, peppermint, and thyme. The flavor is bread, malt, caramel, dates, toasted pecans, and vanilla, with a soft, saltiness throughout. German and English hops offer a faint hint of herbal bitterness. The finish is spicy with hints of black pepper, and there's a hint of some tongue-numbing pepper and alcohol, as well. The beer's full body gains structure from the rye's tannins, which is further supported by fluffy carbonation and a lasting crown of foam that laces the glass. As the beer warms up, a "dusty," "wooly" flavor develops, which can be an indicator of the wild yeast *Brettanomyces*. These dusty notes combine with the beer's salinity to remind us of its rustic, farmy spirit.

This beer is crying out for steak au poivre or a grilled hamburger. The dark malts would echo the meat's roastiness, and the rye will lend tannins to cut through some of the food's richness while lending a peppery garnish. This beer would be equally elegant with roasted mushroom bread pudding or a salty, earthy cheese, such as Pecorino Romano or Comte, that will bring out the beer's sweetness as counterpoint.