



April 2012

This month's selections, Brother Thelonious and Fred, are beers for the ages. They're both fantastic beers to drink right now, but if you've got the patience, these beers will keep getting better after a year or two or five. Just keep them unopened, upright (don't lay them down like wine) somewhere away from direct light and keep 'em cool, preferably at cellar temp -- between 50 and 70 degrees. They'll mellow, develop, and blossom into incredibly nuanced and tasty beers.

Also, a few words on bottle enclosures. Brother Thelonious is finished with a champagne-style cork and cage. The cork is extremely tightly fitting, and it can be difficult to pull out. There are different sizes and materials of cork stoppers available to breweries and wineries, and sometimes breweries choose a size and composition that fits quite tightly in the bottle neck. This is often to limit the amount of oxygen that can ingress into the beer, and sometimes it's a little extra insurance against the cork popping out of the bottle, since the contents are under pressure. In January of this year, we featured a beer from Brasserie Fantôme, which has the unusual enclosure combination of a straight cork and a standard crown cap. I didn't have an answer for why at the time, but I've since traveled to Brasserie Fantôme and was able to ask owner-brewer Dany Prignon why he uses the two enclosures. His reasons: the cork takes up space in the bottle neck, thereby reducing the amount of gas in the bottle (if any oxygen sneaks into that headspace during bottling, it could potentially stale the beer); and the crown is there to keep the cork from popping out, a possibility he learned about the hard way early on at Fantôme when multiple boxed cases of beer popped their corks prematurely!

Cheers,

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

Brother Thelonious

Copyright Rich Higgins, 2012.

North Coast Brewing Company, Ft. Bragg, California, USA

9.4% ABV \$/750 mL

North Coast's Brother Thelonious is a beguiling beer. It's big, dark, and high-alcohol, but it's very easy-drinking and smooth. It's a beer, but it has some winery flavors. Its label calls it an abbey ale, which hints at the monastic roots of the beer's style, but, in fact, it is a style called a "Belgian-style strong dark ale" that borrows from the fruity yeasts of Trappist dark ales but emphasizes the drinkability of Flemish secular beers. A lot of this has to do with sugar.

At first blush, Brother Thelonious is a nutty brown ale, a little north of 9% abv, that is fermented with a yeast that imparts fruity/spicy flavors, including prunes, cherries, figs, cinnamon, and clove. To get that amount of alcohol from malted grains could make for a "malt bomb" -- a big-bodied beer with cloying residual sugars. Furthermore, such a beer's malty intensity might cover up some of the fruity and spicy nuance from the fermentation. Replacing some of the malt fermentables with sugar creates a leaner, more drinkable beer. Before it is fermented, beer is called wort, and adding sugar to wort may sound like heresy, but it is a common practice in Belgian breweries, and many American breweries follow suit. Adding these sugars, either in straight granular form or in invert syrup forms called candi sugar, is called chaptalization. Sugar makes up about 15-30% of the fermentable sugar portion of most Belgian high-alcohol beers. Brother Thelonious is a beautiful Belgian-style dark ale, with a nutty, earthy foundation and wine-like nimbleness, and is redolent of dried fruits, baking spices, and cocoa. But without a little sugar in the recipe, it might have ended up sweet, flabby, and one-dimensional (not that North Coast Brewmaster Mark Ruedrich would never brew a beer like that, though).

Brewing a 9% abv beer requires a lot of fermentable sugar for the yeast (twice as much as for a 4.5% abv beer). The sugar that barley contributes to wort is accompanied by proteins and unfermentable sugars, which add body and sweetness to a finished beer. Cane and beet sugars, on the other hand, are less expensive than barley, are 99.9% fermentable, and do not add body to a beer. When chaptalizing, if the ratio of sugar to barley is too high, the fermented beer can taste cidery, winery, and thin, but when used with a sensitive hand and when fermented by Belgian ale



yeasts, a tapestry of flavors like fruit, spice, flowers, wine, and warming alcohols develop, adding accent to beers that are malty, but not *too* malty. Because Ruedrich chaptalizes Brother Thelonious wort, the beer's alcohol level climbs above 9% while developing a subtle sangiovese or syrah wine flavor (focused by the acidity of the dark malts) and remaining a dry, drinkable beer that is not too sweet or caramelly on the finish.

Brother Thelonious pours into your glass a frothy, chocolate burgundy edged with ruby highlights. The head dissipates quickly, and the highly-carbonated beer effervesces a bouquet of hazelnuts, currants, and wet leaves in autumn. Taking a sip takes you nimbly through fruit, spice and wine flavors, not the deep, dark flavors that the beer's appearance portends. Dark red fruit notes combine with hints of cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, and chianti, with undertones of malt, maple, and leather. Bubbly carbonation, subtle acidity, and some spicy alcohols lend this big beer considerable agility on the palate, allowing it to embrace and then cut through rich foods excellently. Try Brother Thelonious with soft, blue cheeses, caramelized onions, wild mushrooms, or browned meats and game -- or a combination of all of them. A glass of Brother Thelonious with a juicy, grilled burger with sauteed mushrooms and onions topped with melted stilton would be a match made in heaven.

Copyright Rich Higgins, 2012.

Fred

Hair of the Dog Brewing Company, Portland, Oregon, USA

% ABV \$/12 oz.

Alan Sprints has been brewing a range of incredibly interesting beers at Hair of the Dog since he opened it in Portland in 1993. In Fred, he's brewed a strong golden ale that packs quite a peppery and hoppy punch. The peppery flavor comes from rye malt, which gets its spicy flavor from the same proteins that give some red wines their peppery, tannic properties. The beer's bitterness comes from American hops (10 different varieties), which showcase their hallmark flavors of citrus, pine, and woody herbs. This is a big beer -- lots of body, flavor, and alcohol -- but it drinks very smoothly. Two reasons for this are that the rye masks some of the alcohol, and that Sprints has chaptalized Fred, adding a portion of sugar to the malt bill, thus reducing the amount of residual sweetness and body that barley or rye would leave in the finished beer.

Several of Hair of the Dog's beers have first names, which makes for a friendly, almost disarming encounter with beers that are often over 10% abv, aged for years in spirits barrels, and over 50 bitterness units. Fred is named after prolific beer writer and historian, Fred Eckhardt. Portland-based Eckhardt has lent knowledge, inspiration, and a friendly hand to scores of American craft brewers over the decades, and he is looked up to as a mentor. Roswell Barker's (the Hair of the Dog mascot) mustache on this beer's label is an homage to Eckhardt's signature handlebar mustache.

Fred boasts a burnished orange color in your glass. Orange, apple, pine, and mint aromas waft from underneath a thin white head. On the palate, Fred greets you first with texture and body -- the sensation is a thick, extracted, almost marmalade-like body punctuated by plentiful carbonation. Then the beer's interwoven, bold flavors come to the fore: hay, orange blossom honey, ginger, and white pepper, underlain by a firm ribbon of bracing bitterness. The American hops show off thyme, rosemary, pine, and orange flavors. Incredibly, the considerable alcohol is barely noticeable on the palate, even if you let the beer warm up to room temperature.

This beer has great food pairing ability -- don't let its considerable impact and body banish it to nightcap status. Keep it away from grilled or charred foods, and instead match it with intense dishes that have bready and mineral elements, allowing the beer to find a partner in the breadiness and to garnish the pairing with its fruity and herbal flavors. It'd be great with pasta with capers, anchovies, and artichokes, a Chicago-style dog with celery salt and mustard, or a spring-time pizza with green garlic and asparagus. And, of course, it'll be great with cheese -- a aged white cheddar has the sharpness to parry the beer's bitterness and the cheddar's salt and milk will tease out Fred's sweet, fruit flavors.