



May 2012

This month's selections show the paradigm-shift of hoppy beers. No longer are American hops, in their citrusy-piney glory, relegated to the arms race of hoppier and hoppier IPAs. Bitter American and Open Windows come bearing hops, but for political and artful purposes. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

Bitter American

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21st Amendment Brewery, San Francisco, California, USA

4.4% ABV \$/12 oz

With summer right around the corner, backyard warriors and hooky-playing baseball fans will spend time relaxing, enjoying the warm weather, and eating salty potato chips and hot dogs, reaching for the nearest can of cold suds. The folks at 21st Amendment, not to mention craft beer fans across the country, are hoping that can of suds will have flavorful craft beer in it. Enter 21A's Bitter American: a can of flavorful beer that's easy-drinking and anything but insipid.

21st Amendment started in 2000 as a San Francisco brewpub founded by Shaun O'Sullivan and Nico Freccia. For years, they've brewed a variety of flavorful beers that have garnered a Great American Beer Festival award or three. In 2008, they established a partner brewing relationship with a brewery in Cold Spring, MN, that gives them the ability to can their beer. What this means for us, the Americans that are bitter about American industrial beer dominance, is that high-quality, full-flavored, authentic beer is available to us in cans, brewed by Shaun himself in Minnesota, and concocted and test brewed right here in San Francisco.

Shaun and Nico have dedicated Bitter American to unsung heroes everywhere, offering us all an extra pale ale, apparently implying that it's extra pale, not extra strength (which would be the meaning in English beer terminology), as it's straw-colored and an entirely sessionable 4.4% abv. The beer's color, body, and impact are all pretty gentle, and the beer succeeds in being extremely easy-drinking and refreshing while showing maltiness from the Golden Promise heirloom malt and hop bitterness and flavor from the Cascade, Centennial, and Simcoe hops.

This is the ultimate cross-over beer -- it's gentle and inoffensive enough for industrial lager drinkers, and its got enough quality and depth of character to keep the craft beer drinkers coming back. Frankly, it's kind of a crafty guzzler, and it takes a stand against the watery beer that the giant brewing conglomerates have hoodwinked our unsung heroes into drinking for decades. The argument has long gone that craft beer is too filling, too bitter, and downright too flavorful for most Bud- and Miller-Light-swilling Americans. (It's also more expensive, which is the truth, but craft beer is the better value, since with macrobrew, you're paying beer prices for fizzy, yellow water, whereas with craft beer you're paying beer prices for actual beer flavor!) Bitter American's statistics would make a loyal PBR drinker cringe -- 42 International Bittering Units, whatever those are! (A bittering unit is actually one milliliter of isomerized hop alpha acid per liter of beer.) PBR and its fizzy brethren boast a "civilized" 5 to 8 IBUs (this paucity is because bitterness is demonized in the US, even though it is a sought after flavor in European and Asian cuisines).

Something that makes Bitter American such a pleasant beer to drink is that while it does have 42 units of *absolute* bitterness, its *perceived* bitterness is much lower, since that hoppy bitterness is balanced by an all-malt base. The alternative to an all-malt beer is a beer whose malt bill is cut with adjuncts like corn or rice, which are cheaper than barley because they're heavily subsidized by the Federal government. Corn and rice don't contribute much in the way of flavor, color, or body -- or authenticity, for that matter -- to a beer, which leaves a beer lacking in flavor. Try putting even 20 bitterness units in a beer like that and you'll end up with a beer that tastes as bitter as a 70-bitterness-unit IPA, since there's no malt flavor and body to balance and tame the hop bitterness. Bitter American strikes a balance between maltiness and bitterness that is entirely appetizing. I'm not going to say that you can't taste the bitterness -- it's there, for sure, hence the name of the beer -- but I'd argue it's much more civilized than beers brewed by the number-cruncher- and lobbyist-run brewery conglomerates that keep Americans so bitter! If Bitter American is a petition against wasting the summer drinking fizzy, yellow beer, then sign me up.



Pour your Bitter American into a glass. Or don't. Half of the point of packaging their beer in cans is that 21st Amendment wants you to take it to the beach or the campsite where you might not have glassware. The reason to pour it into a glass is to enjoy the beer's aroma of citrusy, piney American hops. The flavor is bready, crackery, and malty, as well as fully bitter with notes of grapefruit, parsley, and pine forest, and it finishes nutty and dry. Drink up and chow down on the chips and hot dogs (and ceviche, tacos, spring rolls, bibimbap, injera, and pizza).

Open Windows Open Hills Tiger Baby
Mikkeller, Copenhagen, Denmark
8.0% ABV \$/750 mL

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Open Windows Open Hills Tiger Baby is a name that hardly falls trippingly from the tongue, but, then again, Mikkeller is no stranger to releasing oddly named beers (including To/From, Big Worse, and It's Alright!). This is a new IPA from self-styled "Phantom Brewer" Mikkel Borg Bjergsø, brewed with oats, mango, and passionfruit. He brewed it to celebrate the release of "Open Windows Open Hills," the third album by the Danish synthpop band, Tiger Baby. Mikkel's vague inspiration for the beer was to match it to their "melancholic pop songs." That's about all the information that the busy, peripatetic brewer has released about the beer. Phantom, indeed.

So, what to make of Open Windows? Is it just a fusiony excuse of a beer from a cagey renegade who's gone a step too far? Or is it a timely beer worthy of tasting, study, and excitement? With little specific information about the beer, it's fun to taste it to figure out what's going on with it, and what it means in a larger context; to taste the *what* to figure out the *why*. First, the what:

Open Windows is a pretty package. Nice syrah/pinot-shaped green bottle. No fancy cork finish, just a low-profile crown. Simple, lean, attractive label. The beer pours a hazy honey orange without much head or fanfare. The nose is perfumey with lavender and sagebrush, vaguely citrusy, piney, and tropical, and a tad carbonic and yeasty. Sipping it, several elements dance back and forth, alternately jockeying for position and patiently waiting to be noticed. There's undeniable fruitiness, the tropical lushness of mango and the heady, alcoholic scent of ripe melon and sauvignon blanc, all edged by red berries and grapefruit. Malt -- the blue-collar worker in most IPAs -- along with oats, define a unique texture, a juxtaposition of minimal sweetness and a silky, full body. The hops and yeast speak up with bitterness and a hit of tartness, evoking green bananas and more grapefruit. The finish is long, interwoven with sour fruits, bready yeast, gray bitterness, and a slightly puckering astringency. All this adds up to a great beer.

Now, the why of this beer: why was it brewed? why does this beer matter? Open Windows is a nuanced beer and paradigm-shifting IPA. It's sensitive and sensual, caressing with hints of tropical sea breezes and walks through the orchard. Rather than trendily chasing ever higher bitterness numbers and alcohol content, it's a balanced IPA, self-confident and respecting of all of its ingredients. It doesn't trumpet its 8% alcohol volume, and instead plays up its malty body while keeping down the residual sugars and lining it all with oaty silkiness. The addition of mango and passionfruit are a nod to fusion and non-traditional ingredients, for sure, but that path has been paved by a profusion of beers brewed with new hop cultivars (Citra, Simcoe, and El Dorado, to name a few) that express mango, guava, and cantaloupe, and by the profusion of excellent fruit beers that have more in common with a Barbera than with Boone's Farm. Like all fusion food, Open Windows takes liberties, but Bjergsø uses them for good and not for the evil of half-hearted fads and media-attraction. It's a mature beer from Mikkeller, a brewery known occasionally to brew off-the-charts fusion beers seemingly for the sake of going to 11. I'm not sure how it complements the melancholy and irony of Tiger Baby's synthesizer compositions, but I'm happy to settle just for the beer, itself, since, like any good pairing, it's greater than the sum of its parts.

For all its malt, body, and added fruit, Open Windows is a pretty dry (read: not sweet) beer. For a really enjoyable food pairing, bring some sweetness out of the beer by pairing it with the salty, fermented flavors of a grilled ham and cheese sandwich on brown bread with a bold, funky cheese like taleggio or fontina. Or, if you prefer sweeter fare, play up the beer's dry, grainy base and fruity-tart highlights with nibbles like yogurt-dipped granola bites or shortbread cookies topped with strawberries and fresh Italian basil.