



**November 2012**

For November, we're celebrating autumn with a rustic English cider and a deep, dark Belgian Imperial stout. They're the bookends of a perfect autumn meal -- start with some slices of local apples or pears, a bite of cheddar, and a glass of Browns Lane alongside, and then finish the meal with a gooey, chocolate dessert and a snifter of Black Albert to ward off a rainy night's chill.

*Cheers!*

*Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone*

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**Browns Lane**

**Crispin Cider Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA**

**5.8% ABV \$/500 mL**

Where cider once was a rustic expression of time, place, and harvest, fermented naturally as a way of preserving nature's bounty in a beverage, it is now most often produced with cheap apples bred for sugar content and fermented with neutral-tasting yeast, producing a drink that is pretty insipid, except for the extra sugar or juice that is added back to the cider to sweeten it in an effort to appeal to the world's growing sweet tooth. England has great climate and soil for growing barley, hops, apples, and pears, and as a result, great beer, cider, and perry traditions developed. "Apples to apples" is a bit misleading an idiom, since the variety of apples is enormous. Most apples are not table or eating apples -- the type that have appealing amounts of moisture, sweetness, and low acidity to be eaten raw off the tree. The vast majority are too small, hard, sour, tannic, or thick-skinned to be enjoyable -- you might rather see the doctor than eat one. A lot of these apples grow well in England's West Country, closer to Wales than to London. They're known as cider apples, and are vastly different from the eating apples of Southeastern England.

Because of its tannic, tart apples, West Country cider tends to be robustly flavored and full of acidity and tannins. Like farmhouse breweries and wineries all over Europe, countryside cideries -- surrounded by farms and orchards and using wooden apple presses and barrels to make ciders -- are packed full of wild yeasts and bacteria that help ferment the apple juice. Among those yeasts are *Brettanomyces* species, whose name is rooted in the Greek for "British fungus". Nowadays most cider is produced at sanitary, modern facilities, and the wilder microflora have been eliminated and the necessary yeast is filtered out after fermentation. These clean, clear ciders are a world away from West Country "scrumpy" -- the unfiltered, rustic cider that often shows the vinegary, barny, cheesy funk of *Brettanomyces* yeast. (There's no way to describe Stilton or Stichelton cheeses in a way that makes them sound tasty -- you've just got to eat them to begin to grasp their deliciousness and terroir. Scrumpy and Brett-tinged ciders are the same way.)

Crispin Cider Company's Browns Lane isn't quite scrumpy -- it's not a farmhouse product, and its yeast(s) have been filtered out to leave the cider crystal clear. However, it is a true British cider, made from pressed West Country cider apples and fermented with a mixed yeast culture including a *Brettanomyces* strain. While Crispin's offices are in Minneapolis, the cidery is the former Fox Barrel cidery in Colfax northeast of Sacramento. With the exception of Browns Lane, Crispin's ciders are all made from 100% unpasteurized juice from US West Coast apples, but for Browns Lane, Crispin contracts with an English cidery to make a traditional, Brett-tinged West Country cider, and it's nothing like England's sweet, insipid ciders with big marketing budgets. Browns Lane in Coventry is where the Jaguar car factory was, and the cider is apparently an homage to the British sports cars and racers of Jaguar's heyday in the 1960s and '70s.

Browns Lane pours a crystal golden color (the Brits use a Nonick pint glass, but I prefer a wine glass), pushing forth a white head that dissipates quickly. Aromas of juicy apples, apple cider vinegar, white wine, wool, and subtle barnyard burst forth. The palate shows more apple flavor, but less of apple juice and more of an apple wine flavor, with nice acidity, sawdust, leather, and blue cheese notes. The body is lean and the finish is quite dry, with just a bit of apple juice sugars on the finish, tempered by the cider's carbonation and the tea-leaf-like bitterness from the apple skin tannins. It's a natural partner for English cheddars and blues, with their salt and oily sweetness. It would also be sublime with a salad of greens with honey roasted nuts, quiche Lorraine, or a warm mushroom tart with a dollop of cr me fra che (or even PB & J on toast).



### **Black Albert Royal Stout**

**De Struise Brouwers, Oostvleteren, West Flanders, Belgium**

**13.0% ABV \$/330 mL**

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From an English countryside beverage steeped in the funk of history, we move on to a new style of beer that may borrow from the past but which takes a bold new direction: Black Albert. In 2003 avid Belgian homebrewer Urbain Couteau (whose signature adorns the beer's label) joined three of his pals to form De Struise Brouwers. This is a small and adventurous brewery -- despite becoming world-famous within its first four years of brewing, the brewery has no full-time employees. Led by Urbain, they originally brewed on a farm that counted among its denizens a herd of ostriches.\* Ostriches are not the most delicate of birds, and the determined new brewers named themselves *De Struise Brouwers* -- *struisevogel* is Dutch/Flemish for ostrich, and *struise* is slang for sturdy or tough. They quickly outgrew their brewing system on the farm, and after a few more years of contract brewing nearby, buoyed by their success, in 2010 they built a small brewery and hospitality room in a former primary school in the nearby town of Oostvleteren.

De Struise is located in Westhoek ("Western Corner"), the western-most part of Belgium. This rural countryside is hallowed brewing ground -- De Struise counts brewers like Van Eecke (Poperings Hommel Bier), St. Bernard, De Dolle, and the monks at Sint-Sixtus (Westvleteren Trappist beers) among its not-too-distant neighbors. It is beautiful, flat farm country, but often under gray skies, muddied from rain, and downright stinky in the springtime from freshly applied manure fertilizer. This humble countryside witnessed the atrocities of two World Wars, but its taciturn people have persevered and their agrarian way of life has yielded a mix of fantastic beer, cheese, and meats (apparently including ostrich). Urbain summarizes De Struise's mission as one of celebrating and promoting Westhoek's unique additions to global history and culinary culture by brewing, in his words, "special," "out-of-the-box," "progressive" beers.

Black Albert is indeed a special beer: a monstrous, 13% alcohol imperial stout fermented with fruity Belgian ale yeast. De Struise calls it their Belgian Royal Stout, which is a riff on the Russian Imperial Stout moniker, instead celebrating Belgium's current king, Albert II. Originally, Russian Imperial Stouts were British beers exported to the Russian Empire in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, where their high alcohol content -- both warming and intoxicating -- found a thirsty greeting among the Russian aristocracy. The style's popularity waned, both in Russia and elsewhere, and it's been American craft brewers who have revived the style, though not without a little extra Yankee fortification of the beer's alcohol, bitterness, maltiness, and intensity. Whereas the original Imperial Stouts were 7% to 8% abv, contemporary American versions hover between 9% and 11% abv. Their rich malts, residual sugars, dark-malt acidity, and floral-tasting and winy alcohols lend a slightly fruity overtone that lends delicious complexity. However, Couteau ferments Black Albert with a Belgian ale yeast, and the yeast's production of esters during fermentation imbues the beer with even more-pronounced stone fruit, dried fruit, and winy flavors. Thus, with Belgian fruitiness, high levels of bitterness balanced by residual sugar, and with a cliff-teetering alcohol level, this is an Imperial stout that isn't Russian, British, or American, but decidedly special, progressive, and out-of-the-box. The beer was originally brewed for a festival of Belgian-style beers at Ebenezer's Pub in Lovell, Maine, but it's now available from time to time to a larger, thirstier market.

Your Royal Belgian Stout pours inky black, dark chocolate at the edges, capped with a dark tan head, and with visually apparent viscosity. The appearance prepares you for a bouquet of roasty coffee, but a little Belgian sleight-of-hand creates a bouquet that's a heady mix of malt, molasses, currant, mint, oxidation, and warm alcohol. A sip enrobes the palate in mousseline dark chocolate, currants, dried figs, ruby port, burnt caramel, and a balance of malty sweetness and hoppy bitterness. It's a tale of roastiness-reserved, of darkness-denied: the dark malts and all of their ominous promises lurk on the palate, peeking here and there through the fruit and malt and wininess, but it's not until the aftertaste that the layers of coffee, smoke, roast, and tobacco flourish, smoldering into the next sip, and, possibly, until your next bottle of Black Albert.