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Many drinkers and brewers today are no longer content with a mug of flavorless suds, and the proliferation of craft beers is challenging many people's ideas of what beer can be. There's now a delicious diversity of beer, with many new beer styles and flavors, as well as revivals of faded flavors and processes. Now when a craft brewery releases the newest, wildest-seeming beer that's been aging in barrels, it's heralded by some as daring and innovative, and by others as a redemption of "lowly" beer by aging it like wine, cognac, whisky, or sherry. But every sip of beer's new, oaky future should also remind us of beer's rustic, woodier past, when all beer was fermented, aged, and transported in wooden vats and barrels.

Racking beer into barrels was the only way of fermenting, aging, transporting, and dispensing beer for centuries. It wasn't until the 20th Century that foundries, factories, and breweries began to supply metal fermenters, steel kegs, glass bottles, aluminum cans, pressurized gas cylinders, and modern draft systems. Industry mined ore from the ground and transformed it into vessels that could be better cleaned and sanitized, able to hold internal pressures, keep out air and foreign bacteria, be non-reactive with their beery contents, and be either sturdy for reuse or inexpensive for single-use and disposal. These were huge, economy- and culture-altering developments, and they also had profound effect on beer.

Today, some craft brewers celebrate the past, and their barrel-aged beers speak of terroir, local culture, and flavorful traditions. Other craft brewers rely on barrels for new discoveries and fusions, using the tools of the past to create *bière nouveau*. This month we taste an example of each of these schools of barrel-aging: an aquavit-barrel-aged Norwegian porter that's more classic than it sounds, and a whiskey-barrel-aged imperial stout from Utah that's an embrace of new American flavor. Each has a lot to say about beer's past, present, and future.

Cheers!

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

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Barrel-Aged Porter

HaandBryggeriet, Drammen, Norway

10.0% ABV \$/500 mL

This is the second beer we've featured in the Club from HaandBryggeriet, which is located on a fjord just south of Oslo. From Haand, we last tasted Dark Force, the brewery's mash-up of a weizenbock and an imperial stout, two big beer styles combined into one epic beer. Haand's Barrel-Aged Porter is a beer that's no less unique, but is silkier and nuanced from its time in barrels. It's a luscious drinking experience, and it transports the drinker to a time when beers were dark and slightly tart, oxidized, and oaky from their time in barrels.

As a beer ages in a barrel, there's a slow exchange of air and other gases into and out of the barrel. Air enters the barrel through the pores in the wood and the tight spaces between adjacent staves. At the same time, water in the beer evaporates (this is called "angels' share") and the beer level in the barrel drops and is replaced with air. When beer is exposed to air, the air's oxygen creates aromas that can be pleasantly honeyish or sherry-like, or that can be unpleasant and reminiscent of paper or wet cardboard. The air can also bring the beer into contact with airborne bacteria or wild yeast, which tend to turn the beer sour. Indeed, slight to intense sourness was common to most beers for centuries, with oxidization and sourness often desirable in "stale" or "stock" beers, and the absence of sourness generally meaning that a drinker had fresh, "running" beer in his or her tankard.

HaandBryggeriet's Barrel-Aged Porter starts as a bold, high-alcohol porter. In the barrels, it develops a slight sourness, with not-unpleasant tinges of solventy, nail-polish-y ethyl acetate and vinegary acetic acid. Both of these compounds are found in certain types of sherry, which undergoes a similar, oxidative barrel-aging process. The connection between this Spanish wine and Haand's Norwegian beer is strengthened by the Scandinavian spirit called aquavit. Aquavit, a grain- or potato-based spirit flavored with Scandinavian aromatics like caraway, dill, and fennel, is often sold unaged like a vodka. There is one Norwegian style of aquavit, called Linje or Linie



aquavit, that is aged in oak barrels -- specifically, used sherry casks. (It traditionally enjoys a wave-tossed aging process aboard ship to the Southern Hemisphere and back, bringing in an intriguing commonality with India Pale Ales.) Haand ages its porter in these sherry-cum-aquavit-cum-beer barrels, celebrating Norwegian history and flavors (and in the process attempting a merger of the favorite Norwegian beer-and-shot combo: a shot of aquavit chased by a beer).

Barrel-Aged Porter pours a burnt coffee brown with a fleeting, tan head. The aroma is practically a walk in the woods, with hints of juniper, wood, fennel flowers, loam, and mushrooms atop lingering scents of coffee and clear spirits. Chocolate-dipped pine needles, bitter cherry pits, and warming booze decorate the palate. The bold flavors of this barrel-aged beer are smoothed and weathered a bit, given character by tattered, oxidized edges and a well-worn mustiness. The beer is a journeyman with a combination of the solventy sourness of sherry and the easy, loamy, maltiness of jenever or blended Scotch. For food pairing, this beer loves chocolate, but you could also pair it with rye bread topped with farmers cheese and berry preserves, or try it with a creamy, intense cheese -- Jasper Hill's spruce-bark-wrapped Harbison comes to mind.

Labyrinth

Uinta Brewing Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

13.2% ABV \$/750 mL

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From a beer that celebrates the anachronistic flavors and history of Norway (with a nod to Spain), we move to a very American beer. Uinta's Labyrinth is a big, contemporary, American-oak-rye-whiskey-barrel-aged American-style Russian imperial stout (quite a mouthful, in more ways than one). Uinta, another brewery we've featured in this Club, is based in Utah, a state without a lot of beer history. While Norway is not known for a robust beer tradition, beer has been brewed on a small scale there for centuries. Utah, on the other hand, has virtually no beer history. It is from this vacuum that Uinta has looked to contemporary American flavor to brew Labyrinth.

Whereas the English were brewing bold, alcoholic stouts (~7% abv) for the Russian aristocratic market 200 years ago, Uinta doubles that amount of alcohol and intensity and also adds licorice root to brew its contemporary American-style imperial stout, clocking in at 13.2% abv. Further relying on the American craft brewing movement's tenet of "bolder is better," the brewery ages Labyrinth in barrels previously used to age rye whiskey. The barrel-aging allows the beer to pick up a full palate of flavor from the whiskey and the toasted American oak: hints of caramel, vanilla, coconut, maple, oak, pepper, and booze. While beers, including American beers, used to be aged and transported in wooden barrels prior to the early 20th Century, they were not aged in flavorful barrels with the intention of developing a new set of flavors from the wood. Labyrinth borrows a little from the legacy of barrel-aging to join the new tradition of craft beer, marrying the flavors of two libations -- American craft beer and American whiskey -- to further develop new flavor and patois of American beer.

Unlike the slight Old World tartness and funk of Haand's Porter, Uinta keeps Labyrinth from souring. This is done by "topping off" the barrels. As the angels' share evaporates, the brewers add more beer to the barrel, keeping the amount of the beer's surface area that's in contact with air to a minimum. Also, the act of pouring more beer into the barrels encourages the release of CO₂ from the beer, which further purges the barrel of unwanted air.

Deep chocolate hued and highlighted with mahogany, Labyrinth pours with just a whisper of carbonation. This is a thick, full-bodied beer, and its viscosity is apparent beneath its thin, tan lacing. The beer has the bouquet of a perfectly pulled espresso: roastiness, creaminess, dark red fruit, smoke, and coffee, with a little oak and whiskey just in case you were bored with everything else. Each sip is, at first, like pulling on your favorite pair of jeans -- cozy, comfortable, and warming. But then you pick up reminders of the last time you wore them: the smell of the leather booth at dinner, the caramel and vanilla of the crème brûlée, followed by the burn of the whisky shots at the bar, and finally the lingering of the coffee, cigarettes, and maple crullers before you called it a night. Pair this beer with a BLT of smoky bacon, intense sun-dried tomato paste, and chicory. Or go for a maple cruller slathered with crème brûlée, and chase it down with whiskey.