



June 2013

Summer's seasonal fruit inspired the beer selections this month. Eating cherries, strawberries, and nectarines is great, but with Kriek Boon and Almanac's Farmer's Reserve #3, you can drink them, too. Both are fruity, tart, and oaked, blurring the line between wine and beer.

Prost!

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

Kriek Boon

Brouwerij Boon, Lembeek, Flemish Brabant, Belgium

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4.0% ABV \$/750 ml

In the Middle Ages, much beer was wild and sour, touched by the same mysterious influences of the heavens that turned wheat dough into sourdough, that preserved wine as vinegar, that cultured butter and soured cream. Today, these sour fermentations are anathema to most brewers, regarded as the unpredictable, inconsistent, and fusty flavors of bygone beers. But in Belgium, there are still producers who rely on spontaneous fermentation by whatever wild microflora ride the orchard breezes and which take up residence in the brewery's wooden vats. Neither ale nor lager, lambic is the charismatic ferment of wheat and barley mash, aged hops, and years in oak. The sour, fruity, earthy beer bears the rustic imprimatur of wild yeasts and bacteria.

One of fifteen-odd lambic producers in Belgium, Brouwerij Boon is among a handful of revivalist lambic producers, brewing in the Payottenland region, aging in oak, and eschewing artificial fruit syrups or sweeteners. Boon may be traditional, but its lambics have a personality all their own. Boon's beers are less acerbically sour and more approachable than those of other lambic preservationists. To Belgians, traditional beer is about inimitability and uniqueness, and Michael Jackson, the late beer writer and acquaintance of Boon's, shared that "Frank Boon does not feel that Lambic was ever intended to be as intensely acidic as some purists would argue." Brouwerij Boon (pronounced "Bone" in Flemish) was founded in 1975, but the facility has been a lambic brewery and blendery since 1680. Boon makes a point that his lambic ages in wood from the mid-1600s, since his oldest vat dates from 1883, made with oak from 250-year-old trees.

In lambic breweries, casks of lambic -- fruited as well as unfruited -- ferment at a variety of rates, ages, and intensities of flavor, most of which are less palatable on their own than when they are blended in the right quantities and at the right moments. Boon's lambic cellar is no different, and he can blend from among lambics that range from "young" to three or more years of age, and that show "mild," "strong," or "heavy" character. A goal of blending is to temper the intensity, acidity, and barnyardy funk of aged lambics; sometimes younger, sweeter lambic is blended in, and often local fruit like cherries or raspberries is added to the barrels. The fruit's sugars ferment completely, leaving no sweetness behind, but they impart fruity flavor and aroma, as well as tannins from their pits, seeds, and skins. A longtime local crop of the Payottenland, the variety of sour cherry known as Kriek (and known in America by its Italian name, Morello), especially from the Schaerbeek municipality, is the traditional cherry in lambics. As suburban development fells Kriek orchards, many breweries supplement with Gorsem cherries grown east in Limburg.

Kriek Boon is the gentlest of Boon's three Kriek lambics, and currently the only one shipped to California. It is a delicious balance of cherry aromatics both bright and deep, set on a tableau of lactic sourness and mushroomy funk with a hint of red wine vinegar. Boon blends 2-year-aged lambic with young lambic before adding two pounds of cherries per gallon of beer. The beer ferments and ages for some months longer in oak. At 4% alcohol by volume, it is an easy-drinking summer refresher, but with complexity from oak aging and its older lambic.

Let your Kriek Boon come up to 45 degrees, then slowly, frothily pour the fuchsia beer and a cap of pink foam. The nose is a sweetish mix of cherry blossoms, black grapes, and a yogurty sourness. The beer's color and bouquet portend a sweet palate, but swirling it around a bit in the glass reveals the light, nimble body and full carbonation of a dry, lean beer. A sip is a study in cherries, from flower to fruit, and highlighting a sour siblinghood with cranberries, red currant, and Nebbiolo grapes. The fruit sugars have fermented completely, leaving tart fruit essence and tannins behind, which are in turn tempered by the gentle, malty sweetness of the young portion of



lambic. Underneath it all is a whisper of lactic sourness and mushroomy, loamy earthiness from the wild fermentation, reminding us that candy-pink beer can have a savory, contemplative nature. In Belgium, it's paired with simple cheeses or a bitter frisée salad with shrimp or duck. In San Francisco, though, on a warm sunny day Kriek Boon calls for mezze with plenty of red onions, sumac, and pomegranate seeds; on a cold, foggy day, pair it with ramen and nori in a miso broth.

Farmer's Reserve #3

Almanac Beer Company, San Francisco, California, USA

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6.0% ABV \$/375 ml

Almanac Beer Company, with its commitment to brewing great beer that highlights Bay Area produce, has become a usual suspect in this Club. The brewery is entering its fourth year of brewing, and owners Damian Fagan and Jesse Friedman are investing heavily in their barrel program. The two operate Almanac as a gypsy brewery -- they're headquartered in San Francisco, but without ownership of brewing equipment, they're free to contract to use other breweries' extra capacity. After a few brews at Drake's Brewing Co. in San Leandro, the duo packed up their malt shovels and moved down to Hermitage Brewing Co. in San Jose, where Fagan and Friedman found enough space to start their barrel program. A couple years and several barrel-aged brews later, Almanac is looking less like a mobile gypsy brewery and more like a well-coopered Belgian brewery. No fewer than 285 barrels house Almanac's various beers, microflora, and fruit as they ferment, bubble, and mature into increasingly complex, delicious beers.

Almanac's Farmer's Reserve beers are the harvest-driven jewels that patiently mature in the barrels, waiting for the blenders' touch. Farmer's Reserve #3 is a blend of beers aged for a year in used white wine barrels, some of which had nectarines or strawberries in them picked during the summer of 2012, and some of which were unfruited but soured with various combinations of wild yeasts and bacteria. In the Farmer's Reserve Series, #3 follows on the heels of a wild ale with pumpkins, persimmons, and ginger and precedes future releases currently aging with cherries and foraged apricots. These are not your grandfather's beers, nor are they your granddaughter's; they're the beers of right now and right here. They capture the essence of the recent harvest and transform it with local microflora, barrels from nearby wineries, and a sip of the zeitgeist that an artisan's craft is to connect and enrich culture with whatever is local.

If large breweries refer to their network of stainless steel tanks as their "tank farm," then Almanac seems to have an ever-growing barrel farm. Fagan's and Friedman's rows and stacks of oak allow them to extend their art into blending, that most-Belgian of brewing benefactions. To be sure, macro-breweries blend more beer in a day than is blended in a decade at Belgium's sour breweries. But at macro-breweries, where blends achieve product consistency, blending is like an arranged marriage; barrel-aging breweries blend to figure out what their beers want to be when they grow up. Each barrel has its own story to tell and contribute to the blend: perhaps a medium-toasted American oak bourbon barrel has held a ruby-colored Almanac ale for the past 10 months, swaddling it with caramelly flavors from its bourbon-soaked staves; or maybe a new oak barrel, full of tannins and oak flavor, is home to a souring blond ale inoculated with wild yeast; or maybe a lightly-toasted French oak barrel, originally used for white wine, awaits nectarines (and their natural *Lactobacillus*) and a golden ale. Almanac's robust barrel aging program has yielded a plethora of beers, and blending and bottling these beers is a harvest from this barrel farm.

Farmer's Reserve #3 pours a hazy honey color in the glass and lifts up a bright white head of fine bubbles. Sweet-sour aromas of juicy peach, lush berries, and pineapple greet your nose, with a little hay and dusty peach skin, too. Taking a sip brings a flood of refreshing, puckering tartness, squeezing the fruit dry and bringing in hints of rhubarb and lemon. Savory hints of aged cheese and heather sneak in courtesy of the woody patois of *Brettanomyces* yeast. The beer is structured with spritzzy carbonation and barrel tannins commanding the mouthfeel before the almondy dryness of nectarine pits and strawberry seeds sweeps the finish. With snapshots of fleshy fruit, white wine barrels, and the summer solstice in every sip, it's an exceptionally-executed, majestic beer. Enjoy it with, fittingly, stone fruit and berries, hopefully with some skin-on almonds and a ripened goat cheese like Redwood Hill Farm's Camellia or Cameo.