

Time is Ripe for Sour Beers



Many people may know what makes a great wine, but beer doesn't receive the same serious appreciation. That's changing with the surge in popularity of sour beers among Northwest brewers and consumers. Aged in the barrel and in the bottle to create complex flavor profiles, sour beers share similarities with wine and are worthy of closer study.

By Adem Tepedelen

Close your eyes and take a sip of Cascade Brewing's Apricot Ale, and a first guess as to what you're drinking would likely not be beer. It's effervescent, with a foamy head recalling the fine mousse of a sparkling wine. On the palate, there's tart acidity followed by layers of ripe stone fruit flavors and a fresh, clean finish. There's no malty sweetness, no piney or citrusy hop aromas, and no bitterness. "Champagne?" you might wonder.

No, this is a Belgian-style sour ale, and it's one of a burgeoning crop of locally made sour beers. For quaffers who think that the world of fermented grains and hops holds nothing for them, these beers just might make them think again.

Sour beers originated in Belgium and Germany hundreds of years ago, and today they're enjoying a renaissance among Northwest brewers. "There's more going on, more dimensions to the kinds of flavors," says brewmaster Iain Hill of Yaletown Brewing Company in Vancouver, B.C. "They have a refreshing quality. So much about the taste is really lovely."

Sour beers offer relief from the über-

hoppy brews that the Northwest has become famous for. "You take a sip and it's very clean on your palate," says Ron Gansberg, Cascade Brewing's brewmaster. "And, quite frankly, it drinks more like a wine. You don't just sit there and gulp it like you do beer."

Perhaps the hardest thing to swallow about sours is, well, the name. The word "sour" is typically associated with spoiled food or those brightly colored candies made in an array of mouth-puckering flavors. "Some sour beers are very acidic, but ours are more approachable," says Gansberg, who started out making wine before signing on with Portland's BridgePort Brewing in 1986. "They fall more in line with the acid levels in wines."

Sours are made in a range of styles, from super-dry (gueuze) to sweet (fruit lambic). Tartness, in varying degrees, is a common trait. "I've had dry ones and sweet ones and fruity ones," says Alejandro Brown, brewmaster/owner of Big Al's Brewing in Seattle. Big Al's Watermelon Sour, made with fresh watermelons, was a hit last summer, and Brown is planning to make more this season. "I'm really

embracing them,” he says. “They cover such a wide range of flavors.”

So, what makes them sour? Brewers add wild yeasts and bacteria during the brewing process, and some souring agents come from the barrels in which the beers are aged.

Undesirable in the winemaking process, *brettanomyces* is one such yeast strain that traditionally has been used in the making of sour beers. Tracing back to Brussels, Belgium, brewers let the wort (the liquid extracted from a combination of hot water, malted barley, and unmalted wheat) cool in an exposed area. Fermentation occurred spontaneously when airborne (“wild”) *brettanomyces* came into contact with the wort.

Nowadays, brewing has been brought indoors into controlled environments, but the same principles are applied. Brewmasters inoculate their ales with different yeast strains and bacteria (*lactobacillus*, *pediococcus*, *acetobacter*), which normally they would not want anywhere near their beer. “To physically go out there and take some of these known bad boys and throw them into beer is a little bit on the crazy side,” says Larry Sidor, brewmaster at Portland’s Deschutes Brewing.

Souring agents also affect the beer during barrel ageing. Microbes flourish in old oak barrels once used for ageing wine, port, or whiskey, now repurposed for the service of conditioning beer.

The addition of fruit during the barrel-ageing process is another technique that brewers use in crafting sour beers. From watermelons and apricots, to cherries, raspberries, citrus, and chile peppers, fruits add flavor and contribute sugars that aid fermentation.

The brewing-to-bottling process may take two years or more, plus additional time for ageing in the bottle. For brewers accustomed to making ale in a few weeks, making sour beers requires patience.

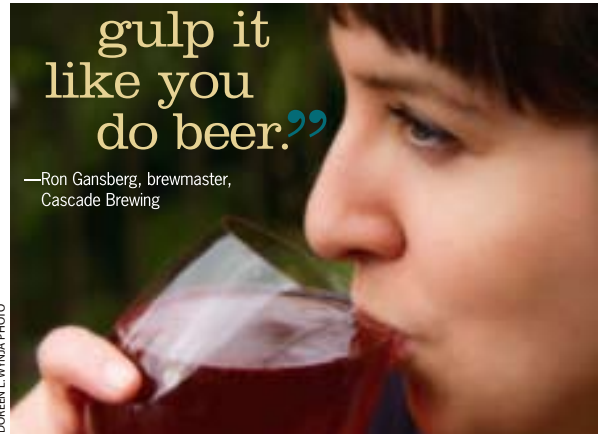
But that patience is rewarded with a different breed of beer. Sour beers can be an acquired taste for beer lovers accustomed to malty or hoppy flavors, but for wine drinkers, the appeal may be a lot stronger.

For one thing, sour beers are incredibly

“You don’t just sit there and gulp it like you do beer.”

—Ron Gansberg, brewmaster, Cascade Brewing

DOREEN L. WYNIA PHOTO



food-friendly. “The acidity in sour beers opens up the possibilities tremendously,” says Sidor, who recommends pairing his Oud Bruin-style Dissident beer with Rogue Creamery blue cheese.

“Its cleansing quality is one of the things when it comes to pairing beer with food where beer often lacks,” says Yaletown’s ▶

What Comes Around Gose Around

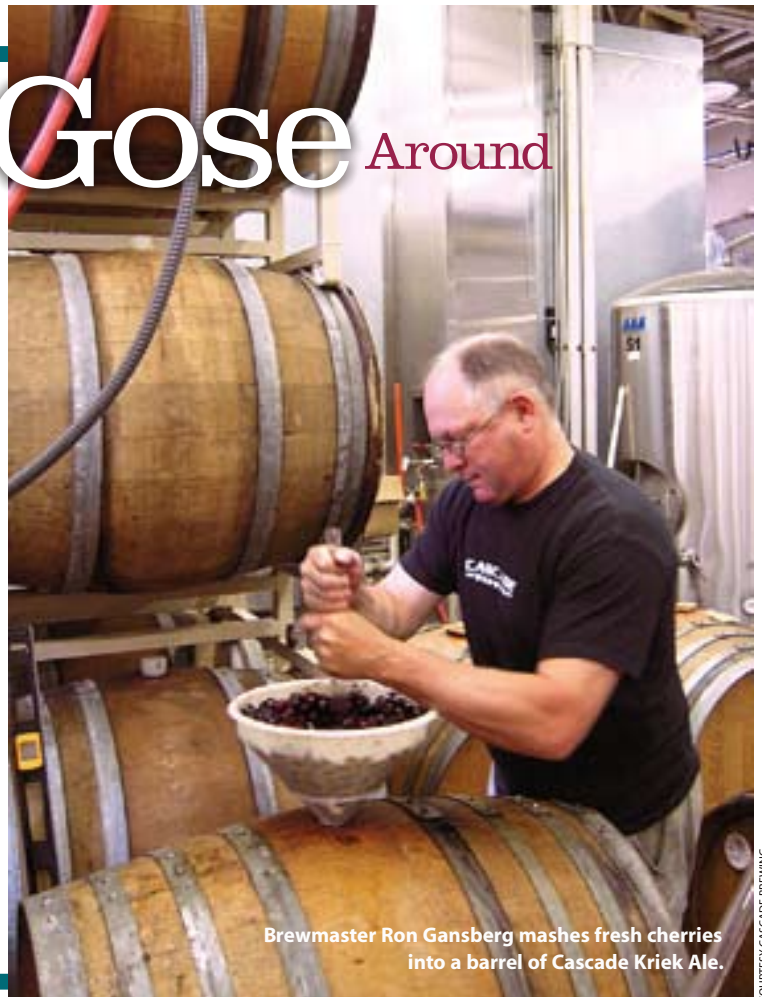
Cascade Brewing has established itself as the Northwest’s premier purveyor of Belgian-style sour ales. Its new Barrel House brewpub is scheduled to open in July, and will provide a showcase for brewmaster Ron Gansberg.

In addition to crafting award-winning sour ales, Gansberg has resurrected an obscure German style called “gose,” which is all but extinct in its homeland. Gose is a tart, quenching wheat beer made with coriander and salt. Gansberg, in true Northwest form, has taken some liberties with it.

Cascade makes gose four times a year, and each version uses seasonal herbs. Fall features nutmeg and cinnamon; winter has hibiscus, cinnamon, sweet orange peel, and fresh cranberries; spring is lemon peel, chamomile, and two types of culinary lavender; while summer honors tradition with coriander and salt.

Cascade Brewing’s Barrel House is located at 935 SE Belmont Street in Portland, OR.

For more information visit cascadepbrewingbarrelhouse.com.



Brewmaster Ron Gansberg mashes fresh cherries into a barrel of Cascade Kriek Ale.

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Hill. “This is a beer that has acid.”

And because of the number of different sour styles being made, there’s a sour style that complements every course of a meal, including dessert. “I was at a friend’s and we were drinking some of our Cascade Kriek,” says Gansberg, who ferments his Flanders-style red ale with a blend of fresh, whole Northwest cher-

ries, then ages it for six months of lactic fermentation in small French oak wine barrels. Paired with brownies, “it was just amazing,” Gansberg says.



A winner of the prestigious Michael Jackson Beer Journalism Award, Adem Tepedelen is a Victoria, B.C.-based freelance writer. Visit his website at ademtepedelen.com.

Tart & Tasty

Only a few Northwest breweries bottle sour beers year round, while others serve it straight from the keg at festivals or for sale on draught at select taprooms. Following are a few of the most widely available bottled sour beers.



1 Cascade Apricot Ale

8.35% ABV—OR Makes a satisfying “thwop!” when the cork is removed. Pours a lovely amber color with a cream-colored head. The aroma of fresh, ripe apricots wafts from the glass. On the palate, juicy tart apricot and a backbone of oak, from 16 months French oak barrel-ageing. Great with hot-buttered corn on the cob.

2 Cascade Sang Rouge

8% ABV—OR “Red blood” in French, this rufous-hued beer with a fluffy tan head was aged two years in oak. Flavors show great depth, redolent of dark red fruits and funky earthiness. Pair with grilled lamb chops.

3 Upright Four Play

5% ABV—OR This sour wheat beer was aged in Pinot Noir barrels with added cherry purée. A gorgeous pink-orange-red color reminiscent of a ripe summer peach, it has a modest head with tart cherries and spice in the nose. Dry on the palate, with tangy sour pie cherry overtones. Perfect for picnicking with charcuterie.

4 Captured by Porches Ich Bin Ein

5.3% ABV—OR A fizzy head blooms when poured, producing a waterfall of carbonation below the surface. Reminiscent of Hefeweizen with lemon, plus spices like clove and black cardamom. Goes great with a crab or shellfish boil on the coast.

5 BridgePort Stumptown Tart

7.7% ABV—OR A blend of ales, 50% aged in oak barrels and 50% brewed with Oregon raspberries, this Framboise-style sour compares with rosé—tartness framing a bouquet of berries. Sip with an onion tart topped with hazelnut-herb pesto.

NOT PICTURED

Deschutes, The Dissident 2008

9% ABV—OR Barrel-ageing with Washington-grown cherries adds depths of ripe fruit flavors to the bracing acidity and whip-crackingly crisp finish. Wash it down with smoked babyback ribs.

More Northwest breweries making sour beers:

- OR** Hair of the Dog Brewing, Rock Bottom Brewery, Roots Organic Brewing, Double Mountain Brewery
- WA** Anacortes Brewery, Elliott Bay Brewing, Elysian Brewing, Pike Brewing, Snipes Mountain Brewing
- BC** Storm Brewing, Yaletown Brewing