

## BIG BEERS FESTIVAL TURNS 10

By TONY FORDER

The first beer I tasted at the Vail Cascade Resort, home of the Big Beers Festival, was in the outdoor hot tub, and the guy who gave me it to me, Greg Geiger of Littleton, CO, ended up winning Best of Show in the homebrew contest for his Imperial Stout. He and buddy Kevin DeLange from Dry Dock were naturally involved in some unofficial palate calibration. The air was in the single digits, and when the hair got wet, it soon turned to icicles, no matter, the tub was mighty hot. Ah, the mountains.

Big Beers (Belgians and Barleywines) began in 2001, the brainchild of Bill Lodge of High Point Brewing. "I knew I'd make a mess of it so I asked my sister, Laura to help," he said. She is the logistical brains behind the 10-year-old fest.

The fest started as a trade show for Lodge's distributorship — the first one featured tastings at a Vail bar and seminars at the now defunct Hubcap brewpub. "It was mostly barleywines (on the American side)," Lodge said. "We had Sam Adams Triple Bock, Sam Smith's Imperial Stout, Avery, Rogue, Chimay, Sierra Nevada, Dupont, Rodenbach, La Trappe, Ommegang."

The educational component has always been included — this year

seminars were held on experimental brewing by White Labs; the Cicerone program with Ray Daniels; beer and food pairing with Julia Herz; and with guest brewers Peter Bouckaert from New Belgium and Lodewijk Swinkels of La Trappe. The homebrewing competition and the beer dinners were added along the way. The host venue has moved around the Vail resorts, but Cascade has already re-upped for next year.

Skin tingling, it was time for the official Calibration Dinner hosted by Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head and Adam Avery of Avery Brewing. Those guys sure have a funny idea of calibration. They warmed us up with appetizers with Old School Barleywine (15%) and The Beast (16%).

Dinner followed in fancy fashion, hosted by executive chef Adam Votaw at the resort's Atwater on Gore Creek restaurant. I remember meeting nice people, having good conversation, some pretty decent food and some great beers — Avery's wild Sui Generis with duck confit and Dogfish Head's Sah'tea with the white chocolate coconut cheesecake particularly struck my fancy. I went to bed extremely well calibrated.

The next day (Friday) featured the homebrewing competition; prior to that there was a special



Above, special guests Peter Bouckaert from New Belgium and Lodewijk Swinkels of La Trappe. Above right, homebrew champ Greg Geiger with friend Bridget.



Welcome Reception. Many brewers answered the call to brew something unique for Big Beers 10th birthday.

What began as the first wave of double digit, double everything, barrel-aged, and sour flavors breaking on the beach of beer has become a veritable tsunami of never before seen brew. Even the Trappists are in on it. The brewers from Koningshoven brought an oak barrel-aged keg of La Trappe Quad.

Deschutes Brewing Co. presented one of only two 100 percent French Oak barrels of their normally blended 2009 limited

release of Mirror Mirror Barleywine. Dry Dock had Eyes Bock a traditionally made German-style strong Eisbock, at a very rich and malty 10%.

New Belgium's Trip IV, inspired by a Finnish Sahti, a traditional rye ale brewed with juniper, was slightly sour, zesty and fruity. Saboteur, from Odell, featured a simple yet sophisticated brown ale "sabotaged" by *bretanomyces* yeast in used woodcut barrels.

Pumphouse blended an old, slightly tart imperial stout (2006) with a young, slightly sharp imperial

stout (2008) to create a Cherry Imperial Stout — they also added a serious amount of cherries "to elevate this beer to decadent levels." Sierra Nevada presented a 25-75% blend of Imperial Russian Stout aged on Bourbon oak for one year with Scotch Ale.

Not all anniversary beers were super strength, however. Papago Brewing poured Fleur de Paradise, a 5% Belgian-style, oak barrel aged brewed with pear, elderflower and grains of paradise.

Lodge said the whole idea of the festival was to get people to taste beers outside of what they normally drink. "In the early days we checked off tastes; people were not allowed to taste the same beer twice." Now with well over 200 beers from 70+ breweries on offer at the main event (held Saturday from 2:30-7 p.m.), that's no longer really practical.

Fridays' brewmasters dinner featured brewers Peter Bouckaert from New Belgium and Lodewijk Swinkels of La Trappe with more treats from chef Votaw. Standouts for me were the cervelas of scallop and eel paired with New Belgium Fall Wild Ale and La Trappe Quadrupel and the rabbit cassoulet with a sweet and sour choice of La Trappe Bockbier or New Belgium La Folie.

The festival draws beer enthusiasts from far and wide — it also continues to draw industry professionals: Gary Fish, president of Deschutes; Doug Odell of Odells, Allagash's Rob Tod; Bell's brewer John Mallett; owner John McDonald and brewer Steven Pawels from Boulevard; and veteran sales manager for Anchor, Bob Brewer were all in attendance.

Said Brewer of the Big Beers Festival, "I like it because it's still small and not over produced. Also it attracts people from all over and I see friends that I don't run into much anymore."

Added visiting La Trappe brewer Lodewijk Swinkels, "I never saw so much creativity in such a small space."

For more info, visit [www.bigbeersfestival.com](http://www.bigbeersfestival.com).

**Tradition.**  
Made in the USA.

From Our Hometown To Yours!®

[www.HometownBeverages.com](http://www.HometownBeverages.com)