



BY
**STEPHEN
BEAUMONT**

My life in beer has taken me to some curious places through the years, from New Jersey garages to Memphis juke joints and smoke-filled Finnish saunas to all-night Barcelona beer fests. And now add to that list Vail, Colorado, in January.



Big Beer Baby in Vail.

Which is not in and of itself particularly odd. I suppose, when one considers that skiers and boarders flock to this mountain resort renowned for its dry, pillow-soft "champagne" powder, and pay considerable amounts for the privilege. But despite my Canadian upbringing, I am neither skier nor boarder, a fact made all too apparent as I wander my way through the Vail and Lionshead villages, pretty much the only person not nursing a bad case of hat hair and making a swishing sound when I walk.

So why begin 2009 in the Colorado mountains, if not to ski? Two words: Big Beer. Or a more precise eight: the Vail Big Beers, Belgians and Barleywines Festival.

So here's the prescription: Take a couple of hundred beers, most 7% alcohol or greater with hardly a dud in the lot, add not one but two beer dinners, mix in a handful of seminars and tastings, and season with some of the best craft brewers in the land. Put it all in an idyllic mountain setting and offer some of the lowest hotel prices and shortest tow lines Vail will see all season, and you have the fest in a fairly compelling nutshell.

I arrived in Vail the Wednesday before things were to get started, figuring that at over 8,000 feet above sea level and in the dead of winter, I might need a day or so to get myself acclimated. Turns out I was right, although stupidly optimistic. While not really, obviously affected by the altitude, I was pretty much unable to fully catch my breath during the entire five days I

was on the mountain. Some locals told me there was typically a two week period of adjustment, however others, including a couple transplanted from New Orleans, offered that true adaptation took considerably longer.

No matter, I thought, breathing could wait. I was here for the beer.

Events began with what has become known as "The Calibration Dinner," taking its name from the beer judges often used to calibrate their palates before beginning adjudication. As I understand has become tradition, it featured the beers of both Dogfish Head and Avery Brewing, in a five course, 10 (strong) beer endurance test at the festival host hotel, the Vail Marriott Mountain Resort. While the dinner was indeed exceptional — Vanilla Bean Lobster Cakes to start, Red Curry Filet and Ribs for the main — and the beers were likewise wonderful, the partnering of the two was unfortunately somewhat lacking. An exception to this was the aforementioned short ribs and Avery's malty "Imperial Oktoberfest Lager" known as The Kaiser, the combination of which was a somewhat unexpected delight.

Two featured the homebrew judging, which I studiously avoided in favor of finishing my week's work in my hotel room, and the Brewmasters Dinner, featuring Russian River's Vinnie Cilurzo and Flying Dog's Matt Brophy, plus their respective beers, of course. Like the Calibration Dinner, one beer from each brewery was served alongside each course, and also likewise, most of the pairings were considered by many to be somewhat lacking. I and others delighted in the Shrimps and Scallops with Green Curry and White Beans, coupled with Russian River's spontaneously fermented Beatitude, but scratched my head at the partnering of the same dish with Flying Dog's Double Dog Double Pale Ale.

Come Saturday, it was time to really kick things into gear with the one price, six hour tasting fest that formed the core of the Vail event. Held at the Marriott, it took place in a large ballroom with a quieter concourse area attached and full, wristband-driven in and out privileges. Although the organizers, brother and sister team Bill and Laura Lodge, reported to me that attendance was more than robust, to the point that they had to send for extra tasting glasses, the tasting floor, while unquestionably crowded, never felt packed.

As for the beers, well, if I told you that I bypassed several times the wares of exceptional breweries like Lost Abbey, Great Divide, Urthel and Dubuison (Scaldia), would that indicate the degree of talent on offer? I thought so. I quickly learned that this was not so

Big Beers and Bigger Mountains

much a festival about quantity — although how can one gripe about a couple of hundred big beers in a single room? — but instead, one of quality. The Lodges began the event nine years ago to introduce the local public to the exciting and unusual beers they distribute in the region, and in that respect, they have been unquestionably successful.

In most other respects, too, for that matter. For each of those dinners — which were, make no mistake, delicious, if not necessarily perfectly paired — patrons were charged a ridiculously modest \$65, plus tax and tip, while the fest itself, with unlimited tastings in brandy snifter-style glasses, was a mere \$35 in advance. Coupled with the aforementioned affordable hotel rates and low airfares, it all packages up into a temptably affordable beer and ski weekend.

Oh, and the brewers recognize this, too. In addition to Russian River's Cilurzo, Flying Dog's

Brophy, Dogfish's Calagione and Avery's, Adam Avery, beer notables in attendance included principles from Pagosa, Papago, Duvet USA, Sierra Nevada, the Brewers Association, White Labs (the yeast

people), Hopunion (the hops people), Anchor, Boulevard and Cambridge Brewing. All drawn by the quality of the event, of course, although perhaps also by the excellence of the snow.

What is a Big Beer Anyway?

The question arose time and again in Vail as to what exactly constituted a "Big Beer." For the Lodges, it means simply any beer greater than 7% alcohol by volume, which certainly makes this one seriously "Big" fest. (Certain people seen leaving the tasting portion of the festival at the conclusion of its six hours resembled more crash victims than beer aficionados.) Still, in theory, at least, that definition would appear to open the door to King Cobra and Old English 800, which few craft beer folk would consider proper Big Beers. So if not alcohol content alone, what should determine "bigness?" Taste? Perhaps, but that's highly subjective. Character? See "taste." Style? Don't get me started.

In the end, maybe the Lodge's definition is best, although perhaps with the caveat that traditional malt liquors need not apply.

RED ROASTERS ALE

HEARTLAND BREWERY

next up **BUFFALO BOCK**
& **NOT TONIGHT HONEY PORTER**

Radio City 212-582-8244 South Street Seaport 646-572-BEER Union Square W. 212-645-3490
Times Square 646-366-0235 Empire State Building 212-563-3433 HEARTLANDBREWERY.COM