



Publisher Brewers Association[™]
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 Technical Editor Gordon Strong
 Art Director Allison Seymour
 Graphic Designer Luke Trautwein
 Graphics/Production Director ... Stephanie Johnson Martin
 Senior Designer Kerry Fannon
 Sales & Marketing Director Barbara Fusco
 barbara@brewersassociation.org
 Business Development Manager
 for Advertising & Sponsorship Chris Pryor
 pryor@brewersassociation.org
 Advertising & Sponsorship Coordinator ... Kari Harrington
 kari@brewersassociation.org
 Marketing Coordinator Spencer Powelson
 spencer@brewersassociation.org
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Brewers Gone Sour

In 2006, five American craft brewers took an epic trip to Belgium that forever changed their perspectives on brewing. (As a side note, I had the distinct pleasure of reading their trip journals and editing them into a cohesive article for *The New Brewer*, **Zymurgy's** sister publication for the craft brewing industry.)

Two of those brewers, Tomme Arthur of Port Brewing/The Lost Abbey and Avery Brewing's Adam Avery, referred back to that trip at the Big Beers, Belgians and Barleywines Festival January 6-8 in Vail, Colo.

"I came back from that trip with a vision of starting a sour program," said Avery, whose brewery now has about 220 barrels in its barrel-aging program.

Arthur is now running one of the largest domestic barrel-aging programs at The Lost Abbey, with 600 barrels, of which approximately 250 are devoted to sour beer.

It's been said that "sour is the new hoppy." Regardless of whether that holds true, Avery and Arthur are devoting considerable resources to their barrel-aging programs and are having a blast in the process. Avery Brewing even experimented with a "ghetto coolship" at one time, said Avery. "I had visions of doing it the way Cantillon does it," he said. "I wanted to see what the Colorado air could do for our beer."

Avery ages most of its beer in wine barrels, specifically its sour beer. Avery's *Brettanomyces* house strain was harvested from bottles of Drie Fonteinen that Avery brought back from Belgium.

"We are still totally in the learning process," said Avery, whose brewery launched the barrel-aging program two years ago and recently released the sixth beer in the series.

However, he said, "I can't say that I see sour ales being the next big thing. It's such a small niche already. I don't really see it exploding." It is a great draw, however, for bringing new craft beer drinkers into the fold. "With beers like this, you definitely will steal some wine drinkers," he said.

American brewers such as Avery, Arthur, Russian River's Vinnie Cilurzo and Allagash's Rob Tod (who were both also on the trip to Belgium) are bringing America's burgeoning barrel-aging scene to the forefront. What sets it apart from the Belgians, said Arthur, is that "the notion of sour beer in Belgium has no wood character." In fact, Arthur related the story of how Jean Pierre Van Roy of Cantillon tasted his award-winning *Cuvee de Tomme* and promptly looked for a place to spit it out.

The trip had far-reaching effects. Tod built a successful coolship at Allagash; Cilurzo has 500 barrels in his Russian River stash (100 percent devoted to sour beers) and plans to add up to 300 more; and the fifth brewer from that trip, Dogfish Head's Sam Calagione, built an enormous tank made of Palo Santo wood for aging Palo Santo Marron.

For homebrewers, procuring barrels and filling them can be a great homebrew club project. We also offer a "shortcut" sour beer technique in this Practical Solutions issue ("Funk with Less Fuss" on page 34).

Is sour the new hoppy? We'll see how it plays out, but in the meantime it's been a treat to sample such beers as Avery's *Quinquedartite* and The Lost Abbey's *Veritas 008*. Cheers!

Jill Redding is editor-in-chief of Zymurgy.