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# Celebrator

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## BEER & TRAVEL ISSUE

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A pioneer of Italian craft beer  
at his iconic Macchè in Rome  
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Photos by Dan Rabin

# BIG BEERS, BELGIANS & BARLEYWINES 2017

## THE FINE-TUNED FESTIVAL FINDS A NEW HOME

By Dan Rabin

In the week following New Year's, a winter storm descended on the Colorado high country. In the storm's chilly wake, hundreds of beer enthusiasts also took the Colorado high country by storm, descending on the resort town of Breckenridge for the 17th annual Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines Festival.

Big Beer enthusiasts at the famed fest in Breckenridge, Colo.

In its longevity, Big Beers has evolved into the premier wintertime beer-themed event in the Rocky Mountains. Although the festival's format has been fine-tuned over the years, there was one significant change to Big Beers in 2017.

For those unfamiliar with the annual fête, Big Beers is a multiday, multifaceted, beer-intensive mountain retreat, far broader in scope than a more traditional beer festival. Over its Thursday-through-Saturday run, the festival packs in a wide range of activities, including numerous educational seminars, beer and food pairing events, two beer dinners, a beer and cigar pairing, yoga, Cicerone training and certification testing, and a homebrew competition. The festival culminates on Saturday afternoon with an extraordinary grand tasting that, this year, featured an over-the-top collection of 450 strong and exotic beers from 140 local, national and international breweries.

**"This is one of those festivals where the brewers are behind their booths."**

As in past years, many Big Beers attendees, including beer industry luminaries from across the United States, took advantage of the festival's mountain town location to ski or snowboard in one of Colorado's best-known resorts.

In its first 16 years, Big Beers was based in the high-end vacation destination of Vail. When its most recent venue, the Vail Cascade resort, changed ownership in 2016, the festival was left homeless. Unable to find an alternative location within the pricey international resort community, the sister-brother organizing team of Laura and Bill Lodge scoured the Colorado Rockies in search of a new festival home, eventually securing the slopeside Beaver Run Resort in Breckenridge.

Returning Big Beers attendees, of which there are many, had mostly positive feedback about the change of venue. Chris Black, proprietor of Denver's venerable Falling Rock Tap House and veteran of a dozen Big Beers festivals, summarized the feelings of many regarding the move from



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# KONA BREWERS FESTIVAL

## SATURDAY, MARCH 11, 2017

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**2 SESSIONS**

12 PM - 3 PM  
**AFTERNOON SESSION**

4:30 PM - 7:30 PM  
**SUNSET SESSION**

hosted by The Bill Healy Foundation



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Vail to Breckenridge. “Breckenridge is more of a real town than Vail. That’s been nice, because surrounding the festival there’s just a ton of little events and special things going on. Tappings. Tap takeovers. That’s a big plus.” Indeed, Breckenridge has a richer beer scene than the more upscale Vail. Local beer venues, including **Broken Compass Brewing**, **Après Handcrafted Libations**, **Kenosha Steakhouse** and **Breckenridge Brewery & Pub**, all hosted special events to take advantage of the influx of discerning beer fans.

On the flip side, there was one notable omission to this year’s Big Beers. “We lost the Fireside,” said Black, referring to the cozy hotel bar at the fest’s former site where brewery personnel and festival attendees would congregate en masse throughout the weekend.

Aside from these external changes, Big Beers executed its well-practiced game plan with few noticeable hitches. In a long-running tradition, Thursday’s kickoff event was a double pairing Calibration Dinner. With Sam Calagione of **Dogfish Head** and Adam Avery of **Avery Brewing** as the perennial co-hosts, it’s hardly surprising that the event is typically an animated affair.

Friday’s schedule featured Cicerone training and certification testing, homebrew competition judging and several beer and food pairing events. I attended Friday evening’s sold-out Brewmasters’ Dinner, which was staged at an off-site restaurant in downtown Breckenridge. The five-course feast included oysters, ceviche, scallops, duck, elk and a decadent dessert plate. Co-hosting the dinner were accomplished brewmasters Phil Leinhart of **Brewery Ommegang** and Florian Kuplent of **Urban Chestnut Brewing** in St. Louis, Mo. The brewers provided stellar beers and a brief commentary to accompany each course. No one left hungry. For those with more stamina than I, Brewers Association Director Paul Gatza hosted a late-night beer and cigar pairing featuring hand-rolled cigars.

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## Big Beers from page 9

On Saturday, Big Beers kicked into high gear beginning mid-morning with the choice of an Experimental Brewing Seminar or a yoga class. I opted for the seminar, which was a captivating panel discussion titled “Experimenting With Local Maltsters.” During the presentation, attendees sampled a selection of similar beers produced with different base malts produced by small-scale maltsters. The variations in color and flavor were profound.

Other educational seminars filled a pair of early afternoon time slots covering a diversity of topics ranging from “Unearthing Ancient Styles” to “Brewery Terroir” to “The Science of Contentious Big Beers: Our Love/Hate Relationship with Bitter and Sour.” I’m a huge fan of these hands-on educational sessions, as their panels frequently feature some of the



Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head Craft Brewery holds court at the Big Beers fete.

most knowledgeable and respected names in the brewing industry.

Big Beers wrapped up with its signature event, the grand tasting. “This is one of those festivals where the brewers are behind their booths,” said Julia Herz, Brewers

Association craft beer program director, when asked what keeps her coming back to Big Beers year after year. “You’re getting brewers trying to impress each other, so you get some of the best beers, in addition to the amazing flagships.”

Not surprisingly, the Rocky Mountain region was well-represented on the festival floor. But what was most impressive was the number of high-profile breweries from across the United States that came to Big Beers to dispense some of their most

esoteric creations. Among the breweries in attendance from outside the Rockies were Alaskan, Bell’s, Destihl, Dogfish Head, Jester King, New Holland, Ninkasi, Surly, The Lost Abbey, Wicked Weed and others. Brewers from many of these breweries manned their booths, pouring beers and talking shop with an appreciative audience.

Hopefully, the town of Breckenridge will embrace its adopted winter brewfest for years to come, ensuring a bright and stable future for Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines. **CBN**

*Dan Rabin is a beer and travel writer based in Boulder, Colo. He is the author of the guidebook Colorado Breweries. You can e-mail him at [brewstraveler@comcast.net](mailto:brewstraveler@comcast.net).*