

CRAFT BEER COMES OF AGE, JUST IN TIME FOR SUMMER!

Sure, we Nova Scotians like to socialize and beer is often an important part of that. At 50 per cent of total alcohol sales, we are definitely a beer-friendly province. But what and how we consume is changing and the rest of Canada is taking notice. For years the East Coast has been known more for ... shall we say, volume rather than variety. Well-known brands like Alpine and Keith's dominated bar tables and refrigerators everywhere leaving little room for dissent. But there's a steadily-growing wave of independent brewing entrepreneurs espousing "drink local," and crafting up some pretty tasty beers. It's a good time to be a discerning drinker!

As early as 1985, pioneers like Granite Brewery's Kevin Keefe were heeding the call for beer with more flavour, rolling out casks of UK-inspired "Best Bitter" and "Peculiar." But this was a movement that would need time to really take hold and not all pioneers would complete the journey. "Highland Brewery," "Red Rock" and "Hans Haus" were all short-lived, failing for various reasons and chilling investment in local breweries for some time. By the mid-nineties though, things were looking up again with a craft beer renaissance sweeping the continent. In 1997, Halifax was

suddenly home to two new operators – Garrison and Propeller - launching strange new brands to a curious but thirsty public. "Extra Special Bitter" and "Irish Red Ale" began appearing on taps around town, down the south shore and pretty much anywhere publicans could be convinced to give them a try.

Flash forward to 2010 and this fledgling "niche" segment has expanded, matured and proven it's here to stay. Despite numerous challenges along the way (the '07-'08 Hop Crisis quickly comes to mind), micros continue to deliver the beer category's only growth and much of its excitement. Despite declining consumption and recessionary woes, provincial small brewers consistently report growth in the 10 to 30 per cent range each year!

So what's behind this movement and what's in it for the consumer? Timing is key with craft beers hitting several of the key trends currently at play – "buy local", all-natural ingredients, environmental sustainability – the

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consumer is now genuinely interested in what they're drinking and is using their purchasing power to effect change.

Today's drinker is also more educated about beer styles, understanding that the mood, place and accompanying food can be as important to enjoyment as what's in the glass. Beer dinners and food pairings are all designed to enhance your overall meal experience. Even wine sommeliers generally admit the range of taste experiences offered by beer is virtually limitless – roasty, hoppy, fruity, unfiltered - there truly is a beer for all settings and Nova Scotia's craft brewers continually deliver with unique and specialty brews.

As with local wines, sometimes we need to hear praise from outside before we appreciate our own. If that's the case, the past few years have given ample proof of beer's coming of age. Multiple-gold winner at the World Beer Championships in Chicago, Propeller Brewing has always strived to deliver on quality and consistency and was the first to catch the nations' eye. Then in 2007 and 2008, Garrison Brewing was crowned "Canadian Beer of the Year" for its "Imperial IPA," a feat that was and still is unique. New start-ups like Sea Level Brewing from Port Williams and veteran extreme-brewer Greg Nash's latest gig, Hart & Thistle in Halifax, all help fuel what some call "Canada's hottest beer scene."

Further stoking this growing movement, the inaugural Halifax Seaport Beerfest was launched in 2007 as a way to celebrate the many styles of beer in a fun, outdoor setting. Now in its fourth year, over 4,000 attendees are expected this August to sample some 160 beers (over half unavailable in the NSLC) and food offerings from a handful of Taste of NS members!

So with summer in full swing, now's a great time to get acquainted with the "locals" of the beer world. In addition to great year-round offerings, many of our micros and brewpubs have crafted tasty new brews with a seasonal spin.

Here's just a few to look out for:

Hefeweizen (Propeller Brewing)

A classic German unfiltered wheat brew with natural yeast haze and refreshing spicy aromas.

Blackberry Wheat Ale (Garrison Brewing)

A crisp, light summer wheat ale with delicate blackberry fruitiness.

Granite Special Bitter (Granite Brewery)

A 5.3% bitter celebrating 25 years of operation!

Moondance Organic Lager (Sea Level Brewing)

An organic lager-lovers summertime brew.

Whether it's on the patio, at a local festival or in nearly any licensed establishment, locally crafted beers are fresh, distinctive and ready for the tasting. Give 'em a try. We're sure you'll be impressed! Cheers!

Submitted by Brian Titus, Garrison Breweries

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