



winner gets
THEIR OWN
brand!

by Craig Pinhey

Parking was a bitch down by Pier 21 last Thursday, as I rolled into town in my Brubug to help judge the 1st annual Garrison Brewery Ultimate Brew-Off. My U-turn on Marginal Rd. elicited a honking horn from a usually friendly Haligonian. I wondered to myself, "Just how many homebrewers ARE there in Halifax?"

But these weren't beer geeks crowding the streets; they were Bill-geeks. Yes, Mr. Clinton was in town. Maybe he'd show up at our beer event.

I settled down in the historic confines of the brewery alongside fellow BJCP (Beer Judge Certification Program) judges Patrice Godin of Moncton and Steve Haynes of Halifax to choose the best of the best homebrewed Ordinary Bitters. There were 31 in all, but Brewmaster Daniel Girard and Garrison co-owner Mark Obermaier, both fresh from a trip to England sampling the real thing, had already narrowed it down to four to make our task easier.

The Ultimate Brew-Off arose out of the partnership between the Halifax homebrewing community and Garrison; a pairing that might make drinkers of Keith's raise their eyebrows. Most big breweries consider homebrewers the enemy, as they steal market share and don't pay taxes on their alcoholic beverages, only on the ingredients, which is completely fair, by the way. But serious homebrewers and craft brewers are one community; many brewers are ex-homebrewers, and most amateurs drink craft beer in addition to their own concoctions.



*previous page, left to right: Judges Craig Pinhey, Steve Haynes & Patrice Godin
top left: winner Brian Harvey (rt) with Garrison Brewmaster Daniel Girard
top right: Garrison President Brian Titus with retail staffers Julie Meredith & Heidi Fifield
right: busting open a cask*

Garrison Head Brewer Daniel Girard and President Brian Titus worked with Mark and Steve Haynes of Noble Grape – local homebrew equipment, and raw material suppliers, and also both accomplished homebrewers and beer judges - to hold the Ultimate Brew-Off, the first of many, one hopes. Girard put out the challenge to local brewers to formulate a beer according to specific requirements. The style desired was Ordinary Bitter, what most beer lovers who've been to the UK know of as "a pint of Bitter." Despite the name, this low alcohol (typically around 3.7-3.8%) ale is actually only moderately bitter, but is far from ordinary, with loads of flavour and body, completely unlike the watery stuff called "lite" beer here in North America.

Ordinary Bitter is very popular in England amongst beer purists, served cask conditioned from the hand pump, but is not a common style around here. The closest would be

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Granite's Best Bitter, but that is higher in alcohol and bitterness. The key to the style is that the beer is a "session ale," meaning that the alcohol and bitterness are not too strong. Thus the palate doesn't tire, and you can drink several pints over a few hours without becoming inebriated.

Brewing an ordinary bitter is not so easy, because the light alcohol and moderate hop and malt flavours mean that defects are difficult to cover up.

Approximately 80 beer enthusiasts were on hand for the sampling and ceremony, and they let out a hearty cheer when local all-grain brewer Brian Harvey was announced as the winner at the evening reception on May 28, which also featured a taste of Garrison's new super-hoppy Hopyard Pale Ale.

Judges agreed that Harvey's entry, brewed with friends Justin Lockhart and Steve Trickett, was perfectly in style, brewed with British Maris Otter Malt, a classic English ale yeast strain, and East Kent Goldings hops, also from Britain. Harvey's brew was light amber in colour, moderately bitter, low in alcohol (3.8%) and had a pleasing malt and hop balance. I found it very similar in flavour to Wellington County Arkell Bitter from Guelph.

As the winners of The Ultimate Brew-Off, Harvey and his brew-buddies received a certificate as well as a very special honour: brewing the recipe with Girard at Garrison, for release in Halifax as a seasonal specialty by Garrison. This is the wet dream of many a homebrewer: to have your own beer brand.

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from left to right: Qian Zhang (assistant brewer), Brian Titus & Daniel Girard

a great event for local beer, but, sadly, **BILL CLINTON** never did turn up...

Second place was taken by Rob and Eric Gray, whose entry was noticeably lighter in colour, looking very much like Boddington's, and more floral and fruity on the nose. An interesting aspect of this brew is that it was made mainly from malt extract, rather than from an "all-grain" brew, made from a mash of crushed barley malt, the way commercial breweries make beer. They did, however, add grain aroma and flavour using a "mini-mash" of crystal malt, amber malt and flaked corn, employ British hops, and use a liquid English ale yeast culture, which is advised if you wish to homebrew beers of high quality.

Third place was Haligonian Robert McGrath, another all-grain brewer and keen member of the local Brewnosers club, who were well represented at the event. McGrath fashioned his ordinary bitter from a base of Maris Otter malt, East Kent Goldings hops and a British ale yeast culture.

Harvey and friends will join Girard to brew his recipe sometime in 2009. "That includes shoveling out the spent grain from the mash tun," quipped Girard. Although an Ordinary Bitter would be perfect for summer, it may be a while before it hits the shelves of the brewery store, private stores or bar taps, as Garrison is pressed to brew all their regular brands on schedule as it is. They will have to come up with an appropriate label design and name, too.

Whatever they call it, the bitter should be a candidate for Garrison's regular Firkin Fridays event at Maxwell's Plum, since Ordinary Bitter is so perfectly suited to cask conditioning.

It was a great event for local beer, but, sadly, Bill Clinton never did turn up at Garrison. We'd hoped he'd stop by for something out of the ordinary, but apparently ex-Canadian Ambassador to the US and ex-New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna was taking him out for a Keith's.



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It was **CORNICHOISE**: a smoked beer with 7 malts & 4 hops & smoked malts

and Belgian, it had some Belgian yeast character to it I think. It's this guy that was basically a homebrewer that did contract brews for people. He called himself 'the smallest brewery in Belgium'. The brewery was Brasserie Artisanale Miller Vertus but it was basically this guy in his garage. He had all these beers. It was like visiting somebody that was a very serious homebrewer. Honestly, I think we were at his house. It's hard to tell, we didn't really go inside. That was sort of a fun place. It wasn't too far from Orval.

TAPS: When you're not drinking a beer, what is your drink of choice?

A lot of things: I love mead, I like wine, I like scotch. I'd probably drink wine (if I had to be specific, I like Rhône valley red wines from France) but I love mead, the kind I make. I like them on the sweeter side, usually. I love Tupelo honey mead. It reminds me of the French sweet wine Sauternes. It's got sort of a honey-apple-creamy character to it. It's sweet, yet it dries out some in the finish. It's sort of the mead version of a Sauternes. Honestly the best meads are always not commercial because home mead makers can put in so much more honey and ingredients, it would be cost-prohibitive for commercial mead makers to try to make them.

TAPS: What is your favourite thing to eat with beer?

Most of the time when I'm tasting beer, I'm not eating at the same time. It can interfere with getting the character of the beer. But if I was eating something with beer I would go to things from Belgium. Belgium is all about the beer cuisine. I think my favorite beer food from there was the carbonnade à la flamande: a Flemish beef onion stew traditionally made with Flanders sour beer, braised meat and onions and served with fries and mayonnaise. I really enjoyed having that with either a Flanders red or maybe a dark Trappist beer. That was one of my favourite dishes in Belgium. The other favourite was mussels in a coconut curry sauce accompanied by a good Witbier, in Bruges.

TAPS: If you were a beer, what beer would you be?

Belgian Dark Strong. It's big and it's bold and it's brash and it's a beer with an attitude!

Learn more about Gordon Strong's online efforts at: www.bjcp.org

Mirella Amato