

Beer of the Month Club

April 2006 Selections

Duchy Originals Organic English Ale

Brewed by Appointment to the Prince of Wales

By Wychwood Brewery, Witney, Oxfordshire, England

5.0%abv \$4.00/500ml

In 1337, King Edward III of England decided that his son – also Edward, but known as “the Black Prince” – should have estates of his own, to provide him with enough income to befit his stature as Prince of Wales and heir to the British throne. To provide this income for his eldest son, Edward created the Duchy of Cornwall – a collection of farms, forests, villages, and even a town or two, mostly in the southwest English regions of Cornwall and Devon – and named his son Duke. Over the years the Duchy has grown to encompass some 160,000 acres across England, but still mainly concentrated in the southwest. For most of its 700 year history, the Duchy was nothing more than a cash cow for a succession of Dukes, and the lands were more or less completely neglected, other than the collection of rents and taxes. But in 1980, when Prince Charles, the 24th Duke of Cornwall, decided to make Highgrove House, one of the Duchy’s key holdings, his Home Farm, things began to change. Charles has long been one of Britain’s (and Europe’s, for that matter) greatest proponents of sustainable and organic agriculture, and he set out almost immediately to revive heirloom species of animals, vegetables, and grains, and to convert all of his landholdings over to organic and sustainable practices. By 1996, the entire Home Farm was certified organic, as had many of Charles’ other properties. Around 1990, Charles conceived the idea for a line of products from his properties called the Duchy Originals, all to be made using traditional methods and ingredients, and predominately from sustainable sources. The Duchy line began with an organic, oated shortbread biscuit, made from organic grains from Charles’ farms under license from the famous shortbread producer Walker’s of Scotland. Over the succeeding years, working in conjunction with some of Britain’s most famous makers of fine foods, he has expanded the line to well over a hundred products that are sold all over Britain and the rest of the world. 100% of profits go to the Prince of Wales’ Charitable Foundation, and well in excess of \$3 million pounds (about US\$5 million) have already been donated.

On his Home Farm at Highgate, Prince Charles has revived several nearly extinct species of cattle, sheep, hogs, ponies, and most important to our tale here, grains. Upon official organic certification of the Home Farm, Charles – who is also a lover of real ale! – set out to find a partner to brew an ale with. After much searching and taste-testing, he settled on Wychwood brewery in nearby Oxfordshire to brew a classic English Bitter to his specifications. The brewing team started with an heirloom variety of barley that Charles had propagated on the Farm called Plumage Archer that had almost been lost to posterity in favor of newer, more high-production strains of barley. To balance the intensity of this very small-grained malt, an organically farmed dwarf variety of hops called First Gold was chosen for its strong citrus character, to balance the sweetness of the malt. The beer is brewed in the traditional English fashion, in large open-top fermenters, using an organic strain of yeast, and is lightly bottle-conditioned before shipping. Like most English Bitters, the Duchy Original is best consumed at what would be cellar temperature in Britain, about 45-50°F, from a traditional pint glass.

The Duchy Original Organic English Ale pours into the glass with a beautiful orange-gold color, with a rocky off-white head. While there is a very fine and continuous stream of bubbles, the head itself dissipates fairly quickly, leaving a fine lace on the glass, but a quick swirl brings the head back in force. Initial nosings show a depth of malt character, with hints of toasty grains, and a light fruity component from the yeast. As the beer warms in the glass, a strong citrusy hop character also begins to emerge. The palate is also rich with sweet malt flavors, including hints of caramel or toffee and light fruit notes. The finish is quite long, slightly bitter, and very drying, with not much of the sweetness that is noticeable on the palate. The Duchy Original Organic English Ale makes a great session beer, but it would also be the appropriate match with a nice vegetarian Indian curry or traditional Bangers & Mash.

Mai-Ur-Bock

Einbecker Brauhaus, Einbeck, Lower Saxony, Germany

6.5%abv \$2.50/330ml

In the 14th century, much of northern Europe was made up of the Hanseatic League, a kind of pre-precursor to the European Union that was comprised of the largest and strongest city-states in the region. Most of these cities were famous for one particular product or expertise, and the town of Einbeck was known as the Town of Brewers. As early as the mid-14th century, the town was famous for its ‘town kettle’, a massive brewing urn that was shuttled around town from home to home on a regular rotation, so that the locals could brew their famous beers. To this day, many of the oldest buildings in Einbeck have front doors that arch to twelve feet or higher and are of double-width – all to accommodate the size of the town kettle. At that time, citizens of Einbeck brewed beer for their own consumption, and sold any excess to the local government for export, which rapidly became the town’s primary source of income. As demand for their famous beer increased, it was becoming necessary to find a way to brew a beer that was strong enough to handle longer sea voyages to Hanseatic member cities as far away as the eastern Baltic and Scandinavia. Thus, the Bock beer (a Bavarian bastardization of Einbeck, pronounced Ein-Bock) was born. To this day, the small (30,000 people) town of Einbeck remains famous for the product of its single brewery, so much so that the first thing you see upon entering town is a monument consisting of three stacked beer barrels.

Most Bock beers in this day and age are fairly dark, strong versions of their house’s regular lagers. In Bavaria, the tendency is toward Weissbock, or wheat bock, beers; in other parts of Germany they can be either wheat, barley, or some combination thereof. But, in Bock’s hometown of Einbeck, the beer is made from pure barley malt. While the bocks of other areas tend to be fairly dark in color, and released in early winter as cold weather constitutionals, the traditional Mai-Bock of Einbeck is actually fairly light in color, albeit quite strong. The name and tradition of Mai-Bock dates to the era when the town shared a brew kettle – on May (Mai in German) first of each year, a lottery was held in the town square to determine what order the kettle would make its way around town. As a sort of celebratory measure, the citizens brewed their strongest and most special beer of the year to celebrate this event.

Although the Einbeck Mai-Ur-Bock is now brewed in a modern, state-of-the-art facility, it is still brewed in the traditional fashion. It starts with a mash of all barley malt, which is boiled very quickly under pressure. Hops are added in two batches, using both pellets and hop extract from Northern Brewer, Perle, and Hersbruck varieties. The aim here is for a mildly malty beer, with just enough hop presence to give the final brew balance. The water comes from the nearby Harz Mountains, and is very soft, lending a very gentle extraction of sugars from the malt. The Mai-Ur-Bock is only lagered (conditioned) for a fairly short period of six weeks so that it is still very lively, or even just finishing fermentation, at the time of shipping. The brewery will begin to ship the Mai-Bock around the end of March, and the last of the season’s brew will be out the door by the beginning of May. The Mai-Bock should be served fairly well chilled, and will show its depth of malty goodness to its fullest from a small beer chalice or red wine glass.

The Mai-Ur-Bock pours a rich amber-gold color with a very light and lacy head. While the head dissipates fairly quickly, the beer is lively enough that the head will return with a brief swirl of the glass. The aromas here are deeply malty, with brown bread, spice cake, malted milk, and deep dried fruit flavors such as prunes and dried apricots. The palate is equally rich, with lots of malt sweetness, and an even deeper fruitiness. The hops are present merely as a balancing agent, and are hardly noticeable on the palate, but for a touch of citrus. The Mai-Ur-Bock finishes very long and sweetly malty, making it the perfect accompaniment to grilled sausages with spicy mustard, especially liver or blood sausages.