



April 2008

Hooky Gold

Hook Norton Brewery, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire, England

4.2%abv \$6.00/50cl

John Harris was a farmer whose land lay in the northern reaches of the Cotswold Hills of Oxfordshire, England. Harris and his family, like most at the time, were subsistence farmers, growing what they needed to feed themselves, and selling any excess. But the Harris farm was particularly well suited to the growing of barley, and Harris himself had some talent as a maltster, and the barley malt from the Harris farm quickly became favored by brewers around Oxfordshire. This was a time when virtually every town of some size had a brewery of its own, long before major brands of lagers grew to dominate the market during the industrial revolution, and John Harris thought it was high time that the village of Hook Norton had its own brewery. In 1849 he started his own farmhouse brewery, supplying ales to the local inns and public houses on a dray drawn by a shire horse. The beers of what would soon be known as the Hook Norton Brewery, LTD. quickly became famous in the area, and even as much of the brewing industry became consolidated under a few large brands, and lager beers became the darlings of the drinking public, Hook Norton thrived and expanded, becoming one of the most important family owned and operated breweries in the country. The brewery is today run by James Clarke, great-great-grandson of John Harris, and is one of only 32 family-owned and operated breweries left in England. It is also the only brewery left in England (if not the world) in which the entire brewing process is steam-powered. The steam engine, a 25 horsepower model installed at the brewery in 1899, is connected by belts and pulleys to the furthest reaches of the brewery, and is used for everything from lifting sacks of grains and hops to the grain attic, to heating the brew kettles, and even the brewery offices. Electrical lighting is the only aspect of the brewery not run by steam.

The brewing at Hook Norton is still extremely traditional, using many of the same processes and equipment that have been in use since the 'modern' Victorian brewery building was completed in 1898. The brewing day starts with the firing of the steam engine at around 6am. Water is pumped under steam power from the springs under the brewery, malt is run through the grist mill, the two are combined with yeast in the original, steam-fired copper boilers, and the brewing process begins. Their Hooky Gold was first introduced as a draft-only spring seasonal in 2006, then made a permanent addition to the line up in spring 2007, and is now released in bottle for the very first time. It is brewed from 100% Maris Otter malt, one of the finest for brewing light-colored ales. It is the first beer from Hook Norton to use American hops – Challengers from Oregon's Willamette Valley, in this case – to add a little pungency to the more common English Fuggles and Kent Goldings hops, which provide bitterness. The ale ferments for seven days in old copper fermenters before being racked by gravity (to remove solids) into cask or bottle, where an addition of brewer's sugar and yeast complete the final fermentation, leaving a mildly cloudy, but all-natural ale. Drink your Hooky Gold fairly cold – between 45-50°F is ideal – from a traditional pint glass, for best enjoyment.

The Hooky Gold pours into the glass with a rich, golden, almost light copper color, with just the slightest haze. The head is faint and creamy white, and leaves a very faint lace in the glass as it subsides. The aromas are bright with sweet malt, and touched by hints of citrusy hops. This ale dances on the palate, with lively carbonation and weight just a touch greater than a top craft lager. The flavors reflect the aromas, with sweet, grainy malt taking the lead, with nice bitterness and pine and citrus notes coming from the hops. The finish is quite dry, with lingering hop perfume. This is a delicious golden ale that is light enough to serve duty as a 'session' beer, but also has enough character to stand up to such traditional pub grub classics as bangers & mash, meat pies, or fish & chips.

Nøgne Ø Pale Ale

Bryggeri Nøgne Ø, Grimstad, Norway

6.0%abv \$9.00/50cl

As a long-haul pilot for the Norwegian national airline, Nøgne Ø ('nuyn-eh UH', near as I can tell!) founder Kjetil (she-TEEL) Jikiun frequently found himself spending time in the Seattle area between flights. It



was there, in the mid-1990s, that he first fell in love with the American craft brewing scene. By 1997, Kjetil had become a home-brewer himself, but not without difficulty. The beer industry in Norway at the time, like much of Europe, was dominated by a few major-brand lagers, and there was no such thing as a domestic craft brewing scene, much less stores that sold supplies for home brewers. So, he began his brewing career by hand carrying supplies – everything from 50-pound sacks of malt and hops, to kegs, tanks, hoses, etc. – back to Norway from a Seattle home-brew shop, stowing them in whatever extra cargo space his return flights had to spare. The first few years of brewing at home were lonely for Kjetil, and he was convinced for a while that he was the only home-brewer in the entire country, before he finally met Gunnar Wiig, another brewing enthusiast that lived in a town just 40K away from Arendal, where Kjetil had been brewing in his garage. As they toyed with the idea of starting a commercial craft brewery, they settled on the town of Grimstad, which sat half way between their two home towns, and began the task of coming up with a name for their new venture. After many ideas were floated and then abandoned, they finally agreed on the name, meaning ‘barren’ or ‘naked island’, which comes from a line in a famous poem by Henrik Ibsen, Grimstad’s most famous and illustrious former resident, describing the numerous rocky isles off of Norway’s southern coast. In 2002, Kjetil and Gunnar registered the name Nøgne Ø with the government, and began their next step: how to build a commercial brewery with no money, no equipment, and no domestic market for the styles of beer they wanted to brew. Soon, they met an enthusiastic and capable welder that was willing to help them build their brewery with only the promise of being paid in the future, named Roger Evensen, and they set about converting a bunch of old dairy tanks and other bits of recycled and re-purposed industrial debris into a workable brewery. It took them a full year of welding, tinkering, running test brews, and in May of 2003, they received their license to commence brewing. Their first batch of ale amounted to about 15 kegs, but they struggled to sell even that, and their experiment seemed doomed to failure. Finally, at the end of that summer, and many trips around the country giving away free samples in an attempt to draw attention to their products, a deal was cut with Norway’s largest importer/distributor of fine wines and spirits to distribute the Nøgne Ø ales domestically, and the team were finally on their way. More travails followed, of course, and Gunnar eventually left the company, exhausted, but the seeds of success had been sown, accolades were pouring in, and over the last 4+ years, Nøgne Ø has grown from 300 hectoliters (an ‘hl’ is about 26.5 gallons, or .85 of a US barrel; what we think of as a keg is ½ barrel) to 2500hl, and their future looks bright for further expansion.

The beers of Nøgne Ø are some of the most expensive per volume that we have featured in our Club, although we have special pricing for the Club members. This is due in part to economies of scale, but mainly to Kjetil’s exacting standards. Due to his love for the assertive West-coast style of American brewing, he will use only whole-flower American hops, which he has to fly in to Norway at great expense (especially with the current severe shortage of Pacific Northwest hops), and he uses primarily Maris Otter malt, a hand-malted barley from England that is among the world’s best for fine ales. Also, the taxes on alcohol production and sales are quite high in Norway, compounding the problem. His Pale Ale is brewed with Maris Otter, as well as small amounts of wheat and caramel malt, and whole-flower Northern Brewer and Centennial hops. The ale yeast is one he got from a microbrewery in the Seattle area, and the water comes from local streams fed by glacial melt. The beer is bottle-conditioned, so there is yeast sediment in the bottle, but this assures that the beer is delivered to you still ‘alive’. Drink your Nøgne Ø Pale Ale fairly cold, around 45-50°F, from a pint glass or red wine glass to allow full aromatic intensity.

The Nøgne Ø Pale Ale pours a deep, hazy, copper color, with a large, rocky, off-white head that leaves substantial lace in the glass. The aromas lead with a big wallop of resinous, citrusy hop character, but there are deeper notes of candied citrus and stone fruits that come from the Maris Otter malt. There is also a grassy note that, in combination with the citrus aromatics, reminds me of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. It is very full-bodied for an ale of its strength, with grippy hop bitterness in the mid-palate, before the sweeter malt notes round out the finish. Try this one with your favorite Norwegian smoked salmon – or any other Scandinavian treats you may enjoy – or rye bread with cream cheese pickles and pickled onions.