



December 2008

Biere de Noel

Northmaen, La Chapelle Ouen, France

7.5%abv \$12.00/750ml

The second December offering comes from a town of 80 people called La Chapelle Ouen. For a more specific geographic reference, it is between Rouen and Paris in the Normandy region of France. The area is well known for Calvados (a barrel-aged apple brandy), and cider (you get the gist, apples!). The Northmaen beers aren't officially imported into this country, but a good friend of ours named Charles Neal travels frequently to Normandy in his search for Calvados to import into the US, and on one of his trips last year, he discovered this tiny brewery. At our special request, he brought just enough of this over with a shipment of brandy so that we could feature it as a true exclusive offering for our Club.

Our main character, Dominique Camus was a barley farmer who was born and raised in La Chapelle Ouen. At the age of 20, he made the move to Paris supporting himself by serving drinks at a brasserie. Ironically it was away from home where he learned about a beer style called *cervoise* brewed with barley and without hops. The beverage was brought to the Normandy area by Vikings and was a staple before apples were cultivated for drinking. This barley fermented beverage was flavored with whatever could be found in the forests which included juniper and elderberries. To complete the imagery, the results were consumed from animal horns. We can assume they only put them down to plunder things. With a background in barley and now a great brewing tradition to build upon, Dominique headed back to the farm to create the Northmaen Farm Brasserie.

Today Northmaen continues the tradition of the Vikings by producing *cervoise* using locally grown barley, open fermentation and replacing hops with heather, wormwood, and ash for flavoring. To get your hands on these, you may need to take a side trip when visiting Paris. If you do visit, consider heading out in June when the three-day Viking festival takes place. The event description reads like a living Valhalla with animals grilled whole, bands, Viking gear and of course wonderful beer out of a horn (the Northmaen logo). With ten times the normal population in attendance, you might have a hard time saying thanks to the mayor, Dominique Camus. It is good to be mayor!

The farm also produces whiskey and main market beers such as their blonde, ambree, rousse, brune and a chestnut beer. All are hand bottled and are slowly making their way to the states in small quantities. We were pleased to be offered their Christmas beer. The Biere Noel is started each November to be released in time for Christmas. The base is a version of their rousse beer using Vanessa barley grown on the property in Normandy – a strain of barley that we have never heard of before, but local to Normandy. Differing from the rousse are the three hop varieties of Strasselpath, Target, and Cascade. The former is a new one to us and we can find nothing on it to predict its contribution. Target is of UK origin and known for high alpha-acid bittering qualities and we all know the joys of Cascade hops by now. Regardless of origin, the hops are also grown on the property. The beer is re-fermented in the bottle, so it does have yeast sediment, and may pour somewhat cloudy if you don't allow the bottle to settle upright for a day or two before serving. Unlike many Christmas or Noel beers, the Northmaen does not see the addition of any spices. Serve your Northmaen Noel in a red wine glass or Belgian-style beer goblet to get the fullest sense of its flavor and aroma profile. It will show best if consumed around 45-50°F.

The Northmaen Noel pours into the glass a deep copper color, slightly hazy with yeast. It has a big, rocky, beige-colored head of foam that leaves a nice lace in the glass. The aromas here are all about the malt and yeast, with big notes of caramel and fruit, and just the slightest hint of hops. This beer has an amazing mouthfeel, its full body seeming almost viscous. The flavor profile mirrors the aromatic one, with big notes of roasted malt, figs, cherry pie and caramel. Dominique uses just enough hops to balance the sweetness of the malt, but not enough to impart any strong hop flavors. It finishes dry, and just a little spicy. This beer might pair nicely with a winter roast (pork and apples, maybe?) or richer stew, but it also drinks well on its own, and has just enough strength to pass as a 'winter warmer'.



Bourbon County Brand Stout

Goose Island Beer Company, Chicago, Illinois

13.0%abv \$5.50/12oz

If you are keeping up on the ever adapting and evolving craft beer industry, it would seem that the hop shortage has elicited a creative response from undaunted brewers. This means a welcome prevalence of sours, wild ales, substitutes for hops and all sorts of barrel aging techniques. Our second December selection can claim to have been in the barrel aging game for over a decade. You will have to pardon us if this beer is available in your neck of the woods, but this is the very first time that they have been available here in California, and this beer is so good, we couldn't help ourselves!

Goose Island Brewing, named after the only island in the Chicago River, was a regional Midwestern brewery founded by John Hall in 1988. John's first interest in brewing was peaked during a trip to Europe and the realization that local, more complex beers are the ideal antidote for an area dominated by industrial brewing. He also had full confidence that the region could produce a beer just as good. The deal-closer and future 'fun fact' is that the decision was cemented during a flight delay reading "*Boutique Brewing*" in an airline magazine. The resulting gamble has since paid off as Goose Island has grown from city treasure to source of regional pride. Thanks to the business relationship with Craft Brewers Alliance (formed by Redhook and Widmer); the more prominent beers are beginning to enjoy national distribution. Commercial success aside, the ongoing story remains family and local rooted with John's son Greg as the current brewmaster and both being very active in Chicago social responsibility groups.

Two brewpubs (one very close to Wrigley field) offer a wide range of local only beers and a few styles are bottled or kegged to wind their way through distribution channels. Bourbon County Stout was first brewed in 1995 to celebrate the brewery's 1000th batch. For the occasion, a huge stout was chosen with enough malted barley to overflow the mashtun and ensure a high original gravity that can stand some aging. After primary fermentation, the beer spent the next 100 days in four-year old bourbon barrels. The result was an instant favorite that is now an annual December release anticipated by beer lovers everywhere. Now in its thirteenth year, Bourbon County Stout is going strong and is the first Goose Island beer distributed in the Bay Area. This was a wise move since standing out in this market can be a challenge, one that this beer is up for. Each year varies a bit in recipe and qualities the barrels naturally impart. For the 2008 edition, the beer was aged for 10 months in 16 year-old bourbon barrels. It's common and recommended to store 'vintages' for comparison between years. This one in particular is expected to be enjoyed at least until 2013. With some discipline, we'll enjoy this year's Bourbon County Stout and keep a few around to compare to next year's. Serve your Bourbon County Reserve in a brandy snifter, or similarly shaped beer chalice, and don't serve it too cold, or you will miss out on its full spectrum of flavors (about 50-55°F should be ideal).

The Bourbon County Brand Stout looks like a black hole when you pour it into a glass. It is so full-bodied that it almost oozes out of the bottle, as opposed to pouring. What little head it has is darker than some stouts: almost charcoal in color, with just a hint of red. The beer itself is as dark as a starless sky. The nose is intense, to put things mildly. The first think to hit is the massive wave of roasted malt flavors – in fact, it smells as if the roasting of the malt is still going on, with hints of wood smoke. Next come waves of dried fruits, including dates, figs and raisins, along with notes of Bourbon (and alcohol), vanilla, and even a hint of licorice. And then it hits the palate like a stout and Bourbon boilermaker. This beer is so thick that it is almost creamy in texture. Just like the nose, the palate leads with strong roasty notes and a hint of smoke, and then the sweetness of the malt comes through, bearing with it the fruity notes. The finish is all vanilla, Bourbon, and warming alcohol. This beer will pretty much obliterate any food you try to serve it with, with the possible exception of a really strong, high-cocoa content chocolate, but one bottle split between two people will be enough to keep you warm and buzzy all night!