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Famous British beer (and whisky) writer Michael Jackson had, for years, selected great beers from around the world for his own rare beer club. When he passed away late last year, his club was left in a bit of a lurch, and his American partners that did the actual maintenance, shipping and handling for the club decided to sell off much of their inventory. Both of this month's selections come from that inventory, and both are exclusives, not generally available in the US. There is also an Irish theme at work here, so be sure to pop a bottle on March 17<sup>th</sup> in Michael's memory, as he did more to expose the world to the love of fine beers than anyone who has ever written on the subject.

### Serafijn Celtic Angel

**Microbrouwerij Achilles, Itegem, Antwerpen, Belgium**

**6.2%abv     \$9.50/750ml**

Achilles Van de Moer was working as a music teacher when he began brewing at home in the early 1990's. He says that he always saw a relationship between making music and making beer, almost as if he was struck by the same muse twice. By 1999, he had perfected the craft to the point where he was ready to go semi-professional, and at the end of that year, he founded Microbrouwerij Achilles (pronounced *AH-sheel* in both French and Flemish) in the garage of his home in the small town of Itegem, outside of Antwerp. He branded his ales *Serafijn* (Seraphim in English), after the angels of the same name, who were said to carry messages between God and mankind while soaring through the heavens singing their celestial songs. The *Serafijn* were also said to have introduced the Celtic people of Ireland the art of brewing, kind of like Prometheus bringing fire to humans, except that in this case, rather than bringing enlightenment, the purpose was to make the Celts unbeatable in battle. Over the succeeding years, Achilles has slowly grown his business, even converting the family room of his family home into a small, informal café, where his friends and neighbors gather to gossip and enjoy his brews. Total production remains miniscule, however, with a total annual output of only 300 hectoliters (about 250 barrels!). The bottling that you hold in your hands was brewed exclusively for the Michael Jackson Rare Beer Club, but since it was brought into the country late last year, Achilles has found an official American importer, and the Celtic Angel is now available in this country, albeit in different packaging.

The Celtic Angel was originally brewed under contract for an Irish musical group, but proved to be such a success, quality-wise, that he soon added it to his regular lineup of ales. It is Achilles' version of the classic Irish Red ale, with a twist. It is brewed using Irish and German malts, both pale and caramel. Only whole hop flowers are used, with the Hallertau, Northern Brewer, Perle and Saaz hops coming from across Europe. He also uses spices in some of his beers, but the Celtic Angel is brewed using only malt, hops, water, yeast, and a small dose of candy sugar at bottling. What gives this ale its interesting twist, flavor-wise, is the use of traditional Belgian ale yeast, which highlights the fruitier aromas and flavors, as well as adding a faint spice note. After the initial fermentation, the ale is allowed to condition in tank, where solids slowly sink to the bottom. This naturally clarified ale is then decanted of the sediment, and bottled with a small dose of sugar and yeast to promote the secondary fermentation in bottle, resulting in a lightly cloudy beer with all-natural carbonation. Being bottle-conditioned, this ale will age for a short while, but lighter ales like this tend not to age quite as well as heavier, richer beers. Drink your Celtic Angel from a traditional pint glass or a large ale chalice, and try it semi-chilled, about 40-45°F, to enjoy it at its best.

The Celtic Angel pours into the glass with a slightly hazy, orange-copper color, and a big, rocky, off-white head that slowly dissipates, leaving a nice lace in the glass. It has a big, malty nose, with hints of spice, as well as citrus and stone fruits, and a touch of floral, resinous hops. It is very light-bodied on the palate, with sweet malt up front, followed by a mellow cascade of fruit flavors and, once again, that hint of spice. The hop presence is less noticeable on the palate, just enough to provide balancing bitterness to the sweet malt. Try this beer with fresh seafood, like steamed mussels, or lighter meat dishes such as rabbit or chicken.



### **Wrassler's XXXX Stout**

**Porterhouse Brewing Company, Dublin, Ireland (and London, England)**

**7.0%abv     \$14.50/750ml**

Ireland has a long and rich brewing history, but the troubles that have afflicted the country over the centuries have had their effect on the brewing industry, as well as the people of that proud nation. In 1832, there were no fewer than 216 breweries operating in the country, and some 65 in Dublin alone. By 1852, that number had dropped to 96 breweries. Over the next fifty years, with the great famine, the struggles against the British occupation, and the mass migration of Irishmen to America that came as a result of these other factors meant a continuing decline in the domestic brewing business. Even after Ireland won her independence, the worldwide Great Depression, the temperance movement in Europe and outright Prohibition in the US, the brewing industry struggled, and became almost entirely controlled by just a few large brewing companies. In 1989, just as the Irish economy began its slow rise from a long period of stagnation, beer lovers Liam La Hart and Oliver Hughes founded the Porterhouse Brewing Company in a run-down old building in the town of Bray, in County Wicklow. Just a local sensation at first, they soon became local heroes as the people of County Wicklow took very well to the idea of locally brewed micro-brews, rather than the mass-produced beers they had been drinking for generations. By 1996, the pair had opened a second brewery and pub in downtown Dublin, and soon followed that with a brewpub in London, and two more on the outskirts of Dublin. All five pubs brew their own ales, which are served only on draft. This bottled version of Wrassler's XXXX Stout was contract brewed under the supervision of Porterhouse's brewmaster at the Meantime Brewery in Greenwich, England, just outside of London, as none of the Porterhouse breweries have the capacity for large, commercial batches of beer – or a bottling line, for that matter.

The recipe for Wrassler's XXXX Stout dates to the very early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was originally brewed at the now-defunct Deasy's Brewery, in West Cork. Deasy's version won many awards, and many hearts, and was said to be the favorite tippie of Irish Republican leader Michael Collins at the time. This traditional, Irish-style stout is brewed using 100% Irish barley, which is considered by many to be the best in the world. Pale, Crystal and black malts are used, as well as both raw, flaked barley and roasted barley, which provide additional body and flavor that the malt itself cannot provide. The imported hops come from the US, New Zealand, Germany, and the Czech Republic, and are air-freighted to the brewery at great expense, just to ensure freshness. Fuggles hops from Ireland, and Kentish Goldings from England's south are also used. Their yeast is a special, old 'Yorkshire Stone Square' variety that they acquired from the Old Romsey Brewery in Kent, England. This type of yeast was chosen because it is very efficient, and leaves very little in the way of sediment or solid particles in the finished beer, which means that they don't have to filter as aggressively, and the finished beer is more flavorful as a result. The draft version of Wrassler's XXXX is only 5% alcohol, and kegged with only naturally occurring carbonation, then tapped with a CO<sup>2</sup> and nitrogen combination, for the same kind of creamy texture as Guinness draft. This bottled version, made especially for the Michael Jackson club, was finished at 7%abv, as the added strength makes the beer more likely to survive the rigors of shipping, and was carbonated in tank before bottling. It is not bottle-conditioned, and while it is strong enough to stand short-term cellaring of as much as a year, or so, I see no reason not to enjoy it on March 17<sup>th</sup>, when the rest of your friends are enjoying their tasty but pedestrian – and mass-produced – Guinness Stout. Try the Wrassler's at Irish cellar temperature (about 50°F), and from a traditional pint glass, to enjoy it at its best.

Wrassler's XXXX Stout pours into the glass an opaque, brownish-black in color, with a big, aggressive head that is about the color of milk chocolate. The aromas are deep and very toasty, with roasted grains, brown bread, coffee, chocolate, and a hint of licorice. The XXXX is a bit lighter on the palate than last month's stout offering, but the flavors are far from shy. Following the nose, first I taste those dark, roasty flavors, mostly coffee and freshly toasted grains, but there is also a hint of something savory there, like marmite or soy sauce. That little hint of licorice, or something else slightly woody, comes in at the end, before echoing away with more smoky, roasted flavors. Try this excellent Irish Stout with heartier Irish foods, like Shepherd's Pie, grilled venison, or a strong Irish cheese.