



July 2008

Hell or High Watermelon Wheat

21st Amendment Brewpub, San Francisco, CA

5.2%abv \$8.99/6x12oz

After several months of scouring the globe for unique beers for our beer of the month club, this time around we were able to keep the search a little closer to home. Well, our home anyway. First up this month is the 21st Amendment's Hell or High Watermelon Wheat.

The 21st Amendment brewpub is located in the (once again) up-and-coming SOMA district of San Francisco. Opened in 2000 by co-founder Nico Freccia and brewmaster Shaun O' Sullivan, it has become a very popular destination for beer aficionados, as well as Giants fans on game days as it resides only a few blocks from AT&T Park. The pub boasts a very impressive array of expertly crafted draught beers, some more traditionally styled, some unique to the brewery. The latter is the case with the Hell or High Watermelon Wheat in which 400 lbs. of fresh watermelon are added to each batch of brew, the result of which is lightly fruity, crisp wheat beer quite accurately referred to by O' Sullivan as "summer in a pint glass". Frequently the initial reaction to a fruit infused beer is a turned up nose with comments like "girly beer" being thrown around, but the Watermelon Wheat is anything but sweet and girly. In fact, O' Sullivan rejoices in the occasions when some of his more burly, hop-headed, rock 'em-sock 'em beer lovers pull him aside and secretly confide in him that they *love* the Watermelon Wheat.

One can posit that the inspiration for the beer was to cater to all those thirsty Giants fans not wanting to weigh themselves down with high gravity beer before a game. That inspiration, such as it was, paid off and the Watermelon Wheat quickly became so popular that the demand outgrew the small brewpub's capabilities. The obvious answer: brew it someplace else. A close look at the label on this can of beer reveals that it is actually brewed in Cold Spring, Minnesota. Probably not the most logical place one would choose to brew a beer that is (for now) destined to be distributed only in the Bay Area, but O' Sullivan considers it to be a perfect marriage. The brewmaster was able to find no properly sized brewing facilities in the Bay Area which also have a canning line. But most importantly, this particular brewery has allowed O' Sullivan total control over the brewing process, including allowing him to use the same ingredients and yeasts that were used in the original brew. In essence O'Sullivan is using nothing but the satellite brewery's "pots and pans", giving him every confidence he will be delivering the exact same beer that was brewed back in San Francisco.

Why cans? Not since screw caps started gracing the tops of some of the world's finest wines has there been such a collective gasp by those who claim to be 'in the know'. Still, Nico and Shaun make a compelling argument as to why their decision to can, not bottle their beers is the right one. Cans are opaque. Light has serious detrimental effects on the flavor of beer, the same reason that the vast majority of the world's finest brewers choose to put their product in darkly colored glass. The cans are also lined, so there is no effect from the aluminum whatsoever on the beer. Another rather insightful justification for the cans is that they fit the lifestyle of the beer drinker. Cans are generally more acceptable forms of containers over glass in many destinations for the beer drinker such as pools, beaches, and golf courses. Lastly, they say that the cans are far more eco-friendly than bottles. Aluminum cans use less energy to produce than glass bottles and are much more likely to be recycled. All in all, I'd say they make a pretty good case!

The Hell or High Watermelon Wheat is a golden-straw color that pours into the glass with a mild effervescence that quickly dissipates. It is hazy, but less so than most of the other American wheats. The nose is reminiscent of soft grains and citrus fruit. Obviously there is the watermelon, but it is not overpowering, more of a complement to the slight hop character. On the palate the beer is refreshingly light bodied expressing much of what you would expect from the nose. The grain bill is evident mid-palate resulting in a slightly creamy texture. As it warms, the watermelon flavor becomes more pronounced, but the beer finishes dry and crisp. This brew is destined for the backyard barbecue and would pair wonderfully with most things you would pull off the grill on a hot day. Shellfish come to mind for sure. You can bet that a cool ceviche washed down with a Watermelon Wheat is a sure way to beat the heat!



Pliny the Elder Double IPA

Russian River Brewing Company

8.0%abv \$4.25/20 oz. bottle

The Russian River Brewing company was founded in May of 1997 by the owners of Korbel “Champagne” Cellars. The recent boom, at that time, in interest in micro-brewed beers prompted owner Gary Heck to build a brewery right in the heart of Russian River wine country. His first hiring decision would be that of brewmaster Vinnie Cilurzo. Cilurzo was on hand to see the first batch of beer brewed at RRBC and remains there to this day, but now has a bit more at stake. In 2002, as Heck Wine Estates was looking to consolidate their business in the wake of slowing sales after the collapse of the dot-com bubble, the decision was made to close the brewery. In the face of impending doom, Vinnie decided that the open job market was no place to be at that time. His logical conclusion? Buy the brewery! The only problem was that the brewery itself was not for sale as Korbel needed the space for wine production. So, Vinnie and his wife Natalie purchased all of the brewing equipment and relocated it to a space on Fourth Street in Santa Rosa, where the pub still remains, but the brewery has once again moved to match the growing demand for Russian River brews.

There is no doubt in my mind that the brewery that receives the most inquiries at our little shop is the Russian River Brewing Company. From the coveted barrel aged brews like Supplication and Beatification to the fairly regularly available Damnation (a Belgian-style golden ale that has enjoyed recognition as a prior beer of the month selection), the ripples of excitement that radiate through the hard-core beer drinking community about Russian River brews is rarely surpassed by any other brewery. Once again, anticipation of the bottling of Pliny the Elder has created a palpable buzz. To this point, this truly remarkable Double IPA has only been available on tap at the RRBC brewpub and a few renowned beer joints in the Bay Area. But now as the dust settles from the relocation of RRBC to its new location in Santa Rosa, the brewery has chosen Pliny as one of two beers to be first off the bottling line at the new location. The other selected brew is the Blind Pig IPA, also an excellent beer that has the unfortunate position of being overshadowed by its bigger, badder, younger brother.

And so I think we should all raise a glass to the RRBC crew for delivering unto us this hop-stravaganza in a year when craft brewers are scrambling for that all important ingredient. Some of the most respected American breweries have all but opted out of the hop game in some of their beers. The Stone brewery, for example, has chosen a Bitter Chocolate Oatmeal Stout for their 12th anniversary brew. No disrespect intended to such creative moves, but you’ve got to love the collective thumb-nosing in the face of tough times from RRBC. Chinook, Warrior, Simcoe and Columbus hops are all added to the mash in a 90 minute hop schedule, then dry hopped during secondary fermentation with Centennial, Simcoe and Columbus hops for that piney sweetness. This is serious hop warfare. And it is definitely worth noting that early reports from long time fans of this hop monster that the bottling lives up to the high expectations. There is very little, if any, noticeable differences between the tap and bottled versions of the beer.

Pliny the Elder is a deep bronze color that hits the glass with a solid half-inch of creamy head that persists with great lattice. The carbonation is not too active, but active enough to know that you aren’t likely to be in for an over-the-top body. The nose is a hop head’s paradise, definitely one of the better noses of any double IPA out there, revealing the piney, spicy character of the aroma hops. There’s little interpretation necessary. What you are about to taste is going to be hoppy. All the excellent flavors of fresh cut grass, evergreen, and big citrus are there. Unlike its Double IPA brethren, this beer is remarkably balanced and doesn't feel over the top even though every common sense input makes it feel like it should be. The balance is remarkable with a tiny bit of kilned malt coming through for body that prevents some of the resinous and overly sweet trappings of others in the category. Overall, for a Double IPA this is surprisingly drinkable and not a 'one and done' order at the bar. This beer is a wonderful accompaniment to savory spiced dishes, hard cheeses, grilled sausages or all on its own. It’s so easy drinking that a few words of caution are necessary; pace yourself!