



## Beer of the Month Club

March 2005 Selections

### Damnation

Russian River Brewing Company, Santa Rosa, California

7.0%abv      \$6.99/750ml

The Russian River Brewing Company was founded in May of 1997 by the owners of the Korbel Sparkling Wine Company (they call it Korbel 'Champagne' Cellars – but that's another story!). Korbel was expanding their wine portfolio at the time, including the purchases of Kenwood and Valley of the Moon wineries. Owner Gary Heck decided that a brewery would be an attractive addition to the company, so he built a microbrewery on the winery premises, right in the heart of Russian River wine country. His first hiring at the new brewery was an experienced brewmaster, Vinnie Cilurzo. Vinnie was on hand to brew the first batch of beer for RRBC on May first of that year, and remains the company's brewmaster, although he now has a bit more at stake than in the beginning. In 2002, as Heck Wine Estates was looking to consolidate their business in the face of slowing sales and the dot-com collapse, the decision was made to close down the brewery. Vinnie, having made his name at the brewery, and having won numerous awards and medals at various beer competitions, decided that he just did not want to be out in the job market at that time. The solution? Buy the brewery! Actually, the brewery itself was not for sale, since it was on the Korbel property and Korbel needed the building for their sparkling wine production. So, Vinnie and his wife Natalie purchased all of the brewing equipment and set out to find a home for their new venture. Eventually the duo settled on a location on Fourth Street in downtown Santa Rosa, where the brewery continues production to this day. Until just recently the only way to procure the beers of RRBC was in keg, so the beers were really only seen in a select few pubs and restaurants around wine country, as well as the RRBC brewpub itself. This month's Beer of the Month Club selection is their first beer ever offered in a bottle – in fact, it is from batch #001, so we are truly privileged to offer it to you as our monthly selection!

One of the classic styles of ale in Belgium is the Strong Blonde Ale. The hallmark for this style is Duvel ('Devil' in Flemish), from Moortgat Brewery, which was first introduced in its current form in 1970. In the years since, several other Belgian breweries (not to mention more than a few from abroad) have created their own versions of the strong blonde ale, although Duvel remains far and away the top seller in its class. One of the more amusing aspects of this copy-cat behavior is the quest for 'Devlish' names – some of Duvel's competitors include Satan Gold, Lucifer, Maudite ('the Damned'), and, now, Damnation from RRBC. The Damnation Ale is brewed using a selection of the finest lightly roasted malts - including Pilsner malt as is done with Duvel, and a variety of Pacific Northwest-grown hops, the most important of which being Saaz. It is brewed to a fairly high strength of 6.5 to 7 percent alcohol, then it is bottled with an addition of maltose and live yeast, so that a secondary fermentation takes place in the bottle. The yeast used for this bottle conditioning is a fairly hearty one, but it is also highly prized for the fact that it falls out of solution fairly easily, and clings very well to the inside of the bottle, meaning that you have a better chance of pouring the beer clear than you would with most bottle-conditioned ales. When pouring, do so very slowly and gently, using a broad, goblet-shaped glass. As you near the end of your pour, pull the bottle well

away from the glass, allowing the beer to develop a fairly thick head on top. It is traditional to pour these beers with a fairly thick head for two reasons: Firstly, it just looks good in the glass; secondly, as the head dissipates, and those fine bubbles in the head burst, an amazing array of aromatics are released, greatly adding to the overall flavor of the brew. Serve the Damnation Ale a bit warmer than refrigerator temperature, and be sure to allow it to come up to room temp as you consume it. On a hot day cooler may be better, but nothing beats a slightly cool Golden Ale on a chilly winter/spring night.

The Damnation Ale pours with a deep golden color that really doesn't look any more dangerous than your typical American lager - the only visual hint that anything stronger may lay ahead is the firm and rocky white head. The nose shows the strength of the beer, though, smelling almost like something that might be served with a little umbrella in it. Big aromas of tropical fruits and pear drops jump from the glass, with hints of white rum and citrusy hops. On the palate, the Damnation has weight without being overly dense, and is much drier than its nose might suggest. There are still noticeable notes of fruit, but here they are more along the lines of dried citrus and nectarine, and there is deep, if not overly roasted malt character all the way through the taste profile. The finish is long and strong, echoing the earlier hint of rum, but finishing with a slightly bitter note from the ample hops. A truly delicious Blonde Ale that will work well with a variety of foods, but makes a great restorative at the end of the day all on its own!

### **La Rulles Triple**

**Brasserie Artisanale de Rulles, Rulles, Luxembourg (Province of), Belgium**

**8.4%abv      \$8.99/750ml**

La Rulles is quite literally a 'Farmhouse' brewery. This term is used fairly liberally by Belgian brewers these days, generally to refer to an artisanally produced, rustic ale, but they are frequently brewed in large, modern breweries. Not so for la Rulles, which is actually located in an old barn in the village of Rulles. The brewery was founded by Gregory Verhelst in June of 2000. He selected the village of Rulles because of the local water source, a stream running from the forest of d'Anlier that has naturally soft water. Water with a low mineral content is the best for brewing, as high mineral content water is less efficient in extracting sugars from grains, not to mention the affect that high mineral-content water has on the plumbing and brewing equipment. In addition to being one of Belgium's rising star young brewers, Verhelst is also a master malter, and malts all of his own barley at the brewery.

The la Rulles Triple is a classic of its type. 'Triple' refers to the fact that the beer is actually fermented three times. The initial fermentation is followed by an addition of more malt, and a more robust strain of yeast to boost the alcohol. Finally, like all bottle conditioned ales, an addition of sugar (usually pure maltose, but sometimes other sugars are used) and yeast is added at bottling time, followed by a period of bottle aging. In the case of the la Rulles Triple, house-malted Pilsner and pale malts are used in both malt additions, and the beer is hopped using Warrior and Amarillo strains from Washington state. Verhelst was able to obtain his yeast from the monks at the Trappist monastery at Orval, a very rare accomplishment that lends the ale a slightly wild character, somewhat similar to that imparted by the Brettanomyces strain of yeast used in Lambic ales. Drink your la Rulles Triple at cool cellar temperature (50-55°F), and serve it in a classic Belgian beer goblet, or a large red wine glass, to best enjoy its vinous aromas.

La Rulles Triple has a slightly cloudy apricot-orange color in the glass, with a very active off-white head – in fact the bottle that I opened for this tasting note foamed effusively from the bottle the moment its crown cap was removed. The aromas are bright and crisp, with candied citrus and hints of pine and hops at the forefront. The palate has a soft fruitiness to it, hinting at peaches and apricots, but with good acidity to balance. There is some warming effect from the high alcohol, but it doesn't seem 'hot' or out of balance. The flavors continue to unfold with time in the glass, eventually showing more malt and spice notes, almost with a hint of ginger snap. The finish is long, and gently warming, turning away from the sweetish fruit notes and ending pleasantly dry. This is a full-bodied ale that really calls out for food, and anything from a rich salmon dish to roasted pheasant would to quite well, although my chicken-pot-pie was greatly improved in its presence, as well!