



Beer of the Month Club

March 2006 Selections

L'Amalthée

Brasserie Lebbe, Villefranque, Haut-Pyrenees, France

6.0%abv \$8.99/750ml

Charles Neal is one of our favorite small importers. Based here in San Francisco, he began by importing Armagnac and the wines of France's south west, where his wife's family resides. A couple of years ago, during the record heat of the summer of 2003, Charles was on a wine buying trip to the region, when he decided he just couldn't deal with the prospect of tasting huge, tannic red wines in the heat. His solution? What any red-blooded American would do in the situation: seek beer! After questioning a few of his wine producers, Charles set off for the tiny town of Villefranque, on the very edge of France's Basque country. There, he found the small farmhouse brewery of Pierre Lebbe (pronounced 'Leb').

Pierre Lebbe, now in his sixties, was born in Belgium, but moved to a farm in southern France with his family as a small boy. The farm is entirely organic – in fact, it is run entirely on compost and wind power – and grows a variety of grains and vegetables, but its main business is production of goat cheese from its herd of 120 goats, hence the label. After Pierre took over the family farm, he decided to embrace his Belgian roots, and took up brewing as a hobby on the side. Then, about ten years ago, a friend of Pierre's to the north decided to enlarge and upgrade the brewing equipment at his small brasserie, and Pierre was able to pick up a small professional brewing apparatus to take his hobby professional.

After much experimentation with recipes, and tinkering with his new equipment, Pierre finalized his recipe – a traditional farmhouse ale patterned after those of Belgian Wallonia and northern France. The beer is brewed in tiny batches amounting to a total production of just 600 hand-filled 750ml bottles per month. It is brewed using organic barley grown on the Lebbe farm, organic hops from Belgium and northern France, water from a spring on the estate, and an organic strain of ale yeast that Pierre sources from Germany. It is brewed slowly and gently, carefully removing most of the beer's solids by racking instead of filtration, and bottled with a small addition of sugar and yeast, to complete its fermentation in the bottle. The beer will pour cloudy as a result, but this is the sign of a live beer, and should be embraced. It should age well in a cool, dark place for a year or two, but it is the perfect answer to a warm spring day – provided we ever see one of those. Drink this ale at around 45-50°F for best enjoyment, and be sure to use a large wine glass or other tulip-shaped vessel, to best capture the head and aroma of the beer.

The *L'Amalthée* (literally, "the malted") pours into the glass with a cloudy golden-orange color. There are noticeable solids floating in the liquid, and a very active, lacy white head, both signs of natural, living beer. The nose shows signs of citrus, sweet berries, and a bit of herbaceous, grassy hop character. The palate is bright and fresh, with light malt notes, and plenty of dry, crisp grass and hop flavors. It has brilliant acidity that leads to a very crisp and refreshing finish. This fine ale has a natural affinity for goat cheese, but it would also help to cut the richness of a traditional *cassoulet*, as well.

Brother David's Double

Anderson Valley Brewing Company, Boonville, California

9.0%abv \$4.50/22oz

Anderson Valley Brewing Company is one of the few remaining pioneers from the “Second Golden Age” of California brewing in the 1980’s, and most of our Club Members will have tried at least one of their products at some time or other, most likely their duly famous “Boont Amber”. Such fame generally makes me nervous about selecting one of their products for the Club, as our stated goal is to expose you to new things, but hopefully we can accomplish both of those feats with Brother David’s Double. This beer (and the good Brother’s Triple, as well) was first released as a limited edition offering last year, but at the time we were unable to secure enough to make use of it in our Club. Thankfully, the reaction that the brewery got from their loyal followers was such that AVBC have decided to make these fine ales a part of their year-round selection, or at least as much so as possible.

The brewery was founded as a brewpub, the Buckhorn Saloon, in 1987, by Kenneth and Kimberly Allen. The original brewery was in the cellar of the pub, and had only one 10-barrel brewing system to begin. This was adequate for the needs of the brewpub, and also allowed them to bottle some ‘bombers’ (22 oz. bottles), and sell kegs to other pubs and restaurants. By 1996, however, more capacity was needed, and the brewing operations moved to a new facility just outside of Boonville that had a 30-barrel brewing system, and enough room to add a 12-ounce bottling line that allowed them to issue six-packs of beer for the first time. Very soon, though, they had again reached critical mass – in fact they doubled their production from 7500 barrels in ’97 to 15,000 in ’98! Next, a brand-new, state of the art brewery was built to order, with 85- and 100-barrel systems, which they moved into in 2000.

Brother David’s Double is a Belgian Abbey-style Dubbel ale. Doubles are, generally speaking, a medium to dark brown in color, with lots of malt character but mild hop presence, and fairly high alcoholic strength. Triples (Trippel, in Flemish) are lighter in color, but stronger still in alcohol, tend to have a bit more hop character than Doubles, and the malt flavors are somewhat obscured by the use of very fruity and fragrant yeast strains that make for a very vinous ale. This Double is brewed using Two-row, Aromatic Special ‘B’, Munich and Chocolate malts for their deep malty flavors and rich color. The hops are used here purely for balance and preservation, and are not particularly noticeable on the palate; they include Mt. Hood and Saaz hops from the Pacific Northwest. A dose of Turbinado sugar is added to the wort to increase potential alcoholic strength, and a very special, imported Trappist yeast strain that can completely ferment to higher strengths is used in fermentation. The fermentation itself is done without temperature control, and lasts some 30 days, resulting in an ale of uncompromising color, flavor and character – and one that is hard to keep up production on! While the beer is not bottle conditioned, neither is it sterile-filtered, so it should cellar well for as long as a year or two. Incidentally, the beer is named for David Keene, owner of San Francisco’s most famous beer pub, Toronado on Haight Street. It seems ‘Brother’ David, one of the areas foremost Belgian ale experts, helped in the development of AVBC’s Belgian style ales. For best enjoyment, drink Brother David’s Double from an Abbey ale chalice or red wine glass to fully capture its exotic perfume, and at a temperature no cooler than about 45°F, or you will lose some of the complexity of flavor.

Brother David’s Double pours into the glass with a reddish-mahogany color and a very fine, quickly dissipating light brown head. The nose is almost explosive in its malt character, with roasted cereal grains, grilled dark bread, toasty brown spices, and hints of yeasty red fruits. The palate is very vibrant, with a creamy mouthfeel, and a very dry attack of rich malt flavors that echo the nose. The finish is surprisingly light textured, with spicy and herbal notes, and just a hint of citrusy hops in the very end. Try Brother Dave’s best with your favorite Monastic cuisines, as well as wild game and other red meats.