



Beer of the Month Club

May 2005 Selections

Racer 5 IPA

Bear Republic Brewing Company, Healdsburg, California

7.0%abv \$8.50/6x12oz

Bear Republic Brewing Co. takes its name from the short-lived independent republic of California. In 1846, a small group of local landowners, trappers, miners, and assorted misfits arrested the Mexican governor of California, General Mariano Vallejo (who secretly agreed to his own arrest, and believed that California should no longer be governed by Mexico), and declared California to be independent. Since the Mexican government was just getting itself involved in a war with the United States of America, no Mexican troops were available to put down the uprising, and California was known as the Bear Flag Republic until the Mexican government ceded California to the US as part of the peace agreement that ended the Mexican-American war in 1848. General Vallejo went on to become one of the founding fathers of California, serving in the state Constitutional Convention, and eventually sitting on the State Senate. The town of Sonoma is still rightly proud of its brief stint as the capital of an independent California, and the grizzly bear is still the symbol of California, even though a grizzly hasn't been seen in the wild here for some time now.

Like many West Coast microbrewing operations, Bear Republic evolved from a talented amateur's part-time hobby into an award-winning mainstay of the California brewing scene. Being a race car driver and a volunteer fireman already, it is somewhat surprising that Richard Norgrove had the time to start a brew pub. But with the help of his wife and parents, he opened the Bear Republic Brewing Co. just off the square in downtown Healdsburg in 1996. They brew many different beers at 'the Bear', but the Racer 5 IPA – named after one of Richard's racing cars – has been their top seller for the past few years. Previously, the Racer 5 was available on draft and in 22oz. 'bombers', and now PlumpJack Wines is pleased to be the first retailer in San Francisco to offer this fine IPA in six-packs.

IPA, or India Pale Ale, is a style of beer that originated in England during their colonial period. When the Brits first tried to ship beer to their troops in India, they found that more often than not the beer would spoil due to the rigors of four to six months in the hold of a ship as it sailed through the tropics. Then, in 1790, one George Hodgson found that if the amount of hops were doubled from the normal level of a pale ale, and the beer was brewed to a higher degree of alcohol, the product had a much better chance of surviving the trip. And thus, the India Pale Ale was born as essentially a double-hopped version of the classic British pale ale. The Racer 5 IPA takes this hopping to another level entirely. The ale is brewed using a combination of Great Western and Briess malts, but its main feature is the interplay between two very distinct American hop varieties, Columbus and Cascade. Cascade hops have been a mainstay of American brewing for some time, but the Columbus strain is a new, high-Alpha acid hop variety mainly used for bittering. Here, it is used as an aromatic hop as well as a bittering hop, and the finished ale is one of the most assertively hoppy beers you'll ever taste. Like most IPAs, the Racer 5 is best enjoyed from a tall pint glass at a fairly cool temperature, although the floral quality of the hops will be accentuated at a slightly higher temperature.

The Racer 5 IPA has a luminous copper-orange color in the glass, with a light and fading white head. The aromas here are all about hops – take THAT you hopheads! Big, resinous, slightly piney and very citrusy, these hops virtually leap from the glass. On the palate, there is an initial attack of dry, slightly bitter and very resinous hop character, but right behind that the beer has an impressive depth of fruitiness. Flavors of candied citrus, pine and toasted coriander lead to a long, dry, and moderately bitter finish. While not for the faint of heart, this beer is no monster, and should pair nicely with the standard American summer fare of BBQs, burgers, and ballgames.

Grotten Brown Ale

Pierre Celis & Brouwerij St. Bernard, Watou, Belgium

6.7%abv \$8.50/750ml

Pierre Celis is to the Belgian craft brewing scene what Fritz Maytag is to America's west coast microbrewing industry – the Godfather. During WWII, and in the years immediately following, the ancient tradition of ale brewing was almost lost in Belgium due to shortages of grain and the costs of rebuilding the local infrastructure following years of war. It was during this time that lager brewing first began to take hold in Belgium, due to the lower costs involved and the speedier production processes. In 1966, Pierre Celis decided it was time to bring back an old style of wheat beer that his home province of Brabant had been famous for in previous centuries, but had not seen in at least a generation, since the last of the ale breweries in the area closed. At the time, Celis was the brewmaster at the small De Kluis brewery, and his creation, Hoegaarden Witbier (named for the brewery's home village), would soon become the most famous ale in Belgium. After many years of building a devoted following, Celis was disappointed to find that the multi-national brewing company Interbrew (brewers of Stella Artois and Labatts, among many others) had purchased De Kluis. While Celis could very well have stayed on as brewmaster under the new corporate regime, he chose to go independent and promptly moved his family to Austin, Texas, in search of his own American Dream.

Celis chose Austin because its artesian springs provided water most similar to that of Brabant, and he promptly set up shop to begin brewing Celis White to the original Hoegaarden recipe. His immediate success once again attracted the attention of a brewing giant, and by 1996 Celis had sold his Texas brewery to Miller Brewing Company. While Pierre's daughter and her husband stayed on with the new ownership, Miller tripled production within a year, losing much of the distinctiveness of the beer in the process. The brewery closed for good in 2000, but Miller sold off the brewing equipment and Celis White brand name to a small brewer in Michigan who continues to brew the beer for the American market. Pierre Celis himself returned to Belgium, ostensibly to retire. But he once again proved restless, and soon was brewing Celis White (he kept the rights to the name in the European market) under contract at the De Smedt brewery. So, in a way, his original creation lives on in three separate incarnations: Hoegaarden, still brewed by Interbrew; the American Celis White, now produced in Michigan; and the 'real' Celis White brewed in Belgium.

Years ago, Pierre had dreamed of making a beer to rival the finest wine – bold and complex, ready to be matched with food at the table, and capable of improving with age in the bottle. The culmination of this dream is Celis' latest creation, the Grotten (trans: grotto or cave) Brown Ale. This ale begins the brewing process much as an Abbey Double would – with copious amounts of roasted malts and well-aged hops to tame their pungency – but has at least two distinctions that set it apart from any other beer. The first is its long period of cave aging in two caves along the Belgian-Dutch border, Kanne in southeast Belgium, and Valkenburg in southern Holland. The constant temperature and high humidity of these caves allows the ale to mature slowly, smoothing out the flavors and bringing a very vinous complexity to the finished ale. The more unusual of these two factors is an herbal component so secret, however, that only the words of the man himself can suffice, "Something nobody else uses in beer. I can tell you I found it in Austin, Texas, and it grows all over the place there. It's a weed." Anyone with knowledge of the local flora in Austin is asked to please drop us a line, as we're dying to know what this 'secret' ingredient might be (I suspect that the leafy outlines on the label may be a clue!). The Grotten Brown is bottle conditioned, and may throw a fine sediment which is harmless, but may also be decanted off. Serve the Grotten Brown in a large Belgian Ale chalice, or your favorite red wine glass, at around 50-55°F for fullest enjoyment.

The Grotten Brown Ale pours into the glass with a beautiful ruby-amber color, and a firm, rocky beige head. Initial nosings show a plethora of red fruits, with tart cherries leading the way, but hints of pomegranate and blood orange zest also chime in. With a bit of swirling, a dry spiciness also emerges, along with hints of a Lambic-like lactic quality. On the palate, this ale is much lighter in texture and weight than its color belies. The palate is dry and malty, with loads of toasted grains and a mysterious herbal/spice component that is somewhat reminiscent of licorice. The finish is crisp and light, leaving the palate ready for another pull right away. Try this ale with wood-grilled seafoods, or your favorite vegetarian dishes, where its dry herbaceousness can show to its full potential.