



## Beer of the Month Club

November 2006 Selections

### Urthel “Hop-It”

De Leyerth Brouwerij, Ruiselede, West Flanders, Belgium

9.5%abv      \$10.50/750ml

The husband and wife team of Hildegard and Bas van Ostaden first met in the late ‘90s when the two were working at the Dutch brewery, La Trappe. Hildegard had just graduated from KaHo Sint-Lieven in Ghent, the most important brewing school in Flanders, and Bas was working in the marketing department. Hildegard was just beginning to face up to the fact that brewmaster jobs were very few and far-between, even for experienced brewers, much less a woman new to the male-dominated profession. After their marriage, she and Bas were able to secure financing and pursue the dream of owning their own brewery. They opened their new brewery, named after the Ley valley where they resided, in 2000. In searching for a brand name for their first beer, they settled on Urthel, named after the Erthels, beer-loving, gnome-like characters (sort of the Keebler Elves of beerdom!) from a fairy tale that Bas had long ago begun work on, but never finished. Their first beer, an abbey-style tripel called Tonicum Finiboldus, was said to have restorative powers of the most amazing kind, being a tonic that prevents and cures baldness – alas, only in Erthels, not humans! With their catchy labels, not to mention high quality product, the Ostadens had to double their production twice in their first year and a half of brewing, just to keep up with demand, and were soon dubbed “Belgium’s newest cult classic” by adoring fans. By 2002, they finally had the production ramped up to a level where they could explore the export market, and the United States was one of the first to welcome the Urthels with open arms.

The latest addition to the Urthel stable is this month’s first selection. Called ‘Hop-It’, this ale was inspired by a trip that Bas and Hildegard made to the West Coast of the US in 2005. Hildegard, in particular, was blown away by the new wave of super-hopped IPAs that were just becoming the rage in the Pacific Northwest, and set out to create her own version of the style immediately on her return to the brewery in Flanders. It is brewed loosely in the style of a West Coast IPA, albeit without some of the newer American strains of aromatic hop varieties. Pilsner malt is used exclusively, in order to allow the hops to truly shine through in the finished product. It is bottom-fermented, using their own strain of yeast and Magnum hops for bittering. Following fermentation, the ale is then dry-hopped with additional Magnums, as well as Spalt and Saaz hops for aroma. It is bottle conditioned, and will throw a slight sediment in the glass, but shouldn’t be aged too long, or you will lose the freshness of the hop character. The finished beer has the alcohol levels and malty fruitiness of a Belgian Abbey-style Tripel, but with the most pronounced hoppiness of any Belgian ale we’ve ever tasted. Hildegard recommends drinking the Hop-It at more or less refrigerator temperature – although I rather enjoyed it a bit warmer than that – and that it should be consumed from a long-stemmed and somewhat fluted ale chalice or wine glass.

The Hop-It pours into the glass with a light yellow-gold color, not much darker than an upscale lager, really. The carbonation is quite active, leading to a big, rocky white head. The aromas are hoppy, but more subtly so than most of our West Coast IPAs, with hints of grass, citrus, and even a touch of spicy clove. It is quite forcibly dry on the palate, showing just hints of the malt, and an abundance of bittering hops. As your palate gets used to the dryness of the beer, more flavors will emerge, eventually offering up more citrus fruits, clove, pepper, and a bit of pine resin. Try the Hop-It with herbaceous cheeses, such as fresh goat cheese, or with your favorite winter salad.

## Winter Ale

**Alaskan Brewing Company, Juneau, Alaska**

**6.4%abv      \$8.99/6x12oz**

Gold was discovered in the panhandle of Alaska, then known as the Yukon, in 1881. The town of Juneau was founded shortly thereafter, and would become the center of the Alaskan Gold Rush, the main port for supplies coming in and gold going out. Almost immediately, the population exploded with incoming treasure hunters, and those hoping to provide goods and services to the newly rich. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Juneau is known to have had at least four licensed breweries. Like most gold rushes, this one did not last very long, and by the early 1900's the loss of population, combined with America's impending experiment with Prohibition, led to the extinction of Alaskan brewing. In 1986, at the very beginning of the modern microbrewing era in the United States, Marcy and Geoff Larson founded the Chinook Alaskan Brewing Company in Juneau, Alaska's first new brewery in nearly one hundred years, and first operating brewery in eighty years. Their first product, the Chinook Alaskan Amber Ale, was fashioned after a gold rush era recipe that they tracked down with the help of a local historian. Within a year or so, the 'Chinook' was dropped from the company's and products' name, due to confusion with the many other products using that moniker, not to mention the hop variety of the same name. Their first winter seasonal ale, the Alaskan Smoked Porter (featured by us a few years ago!), was introduced to much acclaim in 1988. They added the Alaskan Winter Ale to their lineup in 2000.

Many of the beer brewing nations of northern Europe lie well north of the traditional growing range for hops, which prefer a cool but Continental climate, and have a long tradition of using other plant materials in the brewing process. In Scandinavia, the use of birch, larch, and various conifers has long been in practice. In Scotland, heather, gorse, peat and spruce have long been employed. Only in the era of modern international shipping has the use of hops in beer proliferated, and these days many brewers are trying to 'rediscover' the historical use of other ingredients. At Alaskan, Geoff and Marcy have decided to embrace the historic Alaskan use of spruce tips in an ale, recreating a style that goes back to the earliest of Alaskan brews, in the early seafaring and whaling era of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their Alaskan Winter Ale is basically an English Old Ale style, brewed to be quite malty and warming, with Pale, Crystal, Munich, and three different levels of Caramel malts. Their proprietary yeast strain is used in the fermentation, along with pure glacier water from the Juneau Ice Field, a 1500 square mile glacier system that spills into the Alaskan Passage nearby. This ale is has a more generous hop character than would be traditional in Britain, using Czech Saaz hops, but the real key to the brew is the use of fresh, new-growth Sitka Spruce tips in the brewing kettle. One might expect these spruce tips to give an overt piney character to the beer, but instead it offers a surprisingly mild, almost floral flavor and aroma, and a delicate spruce character that really speaks of Alaska. Try the Alaskan Winter Ale in a pint glass, and allow it to warm to slightly above refrigerator temperature, to get the full effect of its unique qualities.

The Alaskan Winter Ale pours into the glass with a crystal clear pinkish-orange color, and just wisps of off-white head. The aroma is subtle, and mostly of sweet, fruity malt notes, but there are faint hints of citrus from the hops, and just a whisper of resinous spruce aroma. The palate is fairly full-bodied, which is accented a bit by the low carbonation level. Flavors of red berries, pit fruits and caramel malt are balanced by a bit of dry, earthy, and slightly resinous finish provided by the spruce tips. The hops blend in very nicely, providing a balance of bitterness without ever standing out on their own. The folks at Alaskan recommend this beer with roast fowl, especially goose or duck, but I think that wild turkey with a fresh sage stuffing would work quite nicely to accentuate the herbal flavors within the beer.