



Beer of the Month Club

October 2005 Selections

Brise-BonBon

Brasserie Fantôme, Soy, Belgium

8.0%abv \$13.99/750ml

When I first got news that there would be a new beer from Fantôme arriving just in time for Halloween, I thought the timing was perfect – after all, *virtually* every Fantôme beer has a ghost on the label, and it has been over two years since we've featured one of their ales. Of course, when the beer shows up, there's a Sumo wrestler on the label. Well, so much for planning! At least there is a ghost on the back label, and it is fairly easy to find a Sumo costume these days...

Fantôme Brewery was founded by Dany Prignon in the small village of Soy (pronounced "Swah"), Belgium, in 1988. Specializing in the Saison style of spiced ales, Dany quickly became known as one of the most skilled and experimental of all Saison brewers. The traditional Saison ale is brewed from both wheat and barley, with the addition of dried bitter orange peel from Curaçao and coriander seed flavoring/bittering agents, as well as hops. What set Dany apart was his willingness to experiment with other spices and fruits in his ales, even going so far as to use dandelion greens, mustard, and other such non-traditional brewing ingredients. While Dany has always been very secretive about exactly what ingredients he uses in any given beer, the results are almost always astonishing, and the Fantôme beers are perennial favorites of ours here at PlumpJack Wines.

One of the few complaints that Dany has heard over the years with regard to his beers is that he doesn't use enough hops to satisfy today's Hophead beer lovers. Being a bit of a stubborn sort, Dany disregarded these complaints for many years, and then took the opposite tack entirely – "let's teach these Know-it-alls a lesson in hops!" So, Dany set out to brew a beer that was so hoppy, so bitter, that no normal human could possibly drink with any enjoyment. Maybe he should have sampled some of the more extreme examples of American IPAs, especially those from the West Coast, because the result of his efforts is an extremely drinkable – although highly hopped – version of his classic Saison, and his fans have demanded more! "Brise-BonBon" translates roughly as "Ball-Buster", and is a jab at those who thought they could do better than Dany when it came to brewing a hop-driven ale. Basically a classic Saison, the Brise-BonBon sees the addition of hops at three different intervals: once in the brew kettle, and then it is dry-hopped twice. Since Dany does not filter any of his beers, this heavy addition of dry hops means there is substantial hop residue in the beer, giving it an almost 'snow globe'-like appearance, in addition to the usual yeasty haze. To get the most from this, or any other Fantôme beer, serve it in a traditional Belgian ale tulip glass, or use your favorite white wine glass, and be sure to serve the Brise-BonBon at around 50-55°F.

The Brise-BonBon pours a hazy, golden-orange in color, with noticeably heavy hop sediment in addition to the customary yeasty cloudiness. The head is brilliant ivory in color, and very active. In fact, a bottle sealed with a Champagne stopper and left in the cooler for three days was still actively fermenting, and had just as lively a head as when first opened. The aromatics are largely in the hop category, but not the wild, over-the-top hop levels that are becoming commonplace over here these days. The hops show more as a grassy, herbal component in the nose, without much citrus or resin. On the palate, there is a sense of sweet roasted malt, but this is offset by big, assertive bittering hops, with loads of herbal, grassy character, and a long, spiced finish. I could see this beer doing quite well with vegetarian dishes, assorted cheeses, or any seafood preparation that uses lots of fresh herbs.

Witkap Pater Abbey Tripel
Brouwerij Slagmuylder, Ninove, Belgium
7.5%abv \$4.50/330ml

The Slagmuylder Brewery has been in existence for almost 140 years, but is now the last surviving brewery in Ninove, Belgium, a town that once supported over a dozen. As is the case with many small, independent brewers, most of these were gobbled up by larger companies over the years, as the smaller guys found it harder and harder to compete in a marketplace dominated by international conglomerates. Slagmuylder, although it is a small, family owned company, have actually been successful enough to buy out one or two of their competitors over the years. In fact, the Witkap Pater beers were originally brewed by the Drie Linden brewery in Ninove, which the Slagmuylders purchased in 1981. The former owner and brewer at Drie Linden was so instrumental in helping several of the Trappist Monasteries restart their brewing businesses after the end of World War II that when he began brewing the Witkap beers, he was given the right by the Trappist monks to label his beer as ‘Trappiste’ until his death – the only layman ever to be given this right by the brothers. Now that the beer is being brewed by the Slagmuylders, it bears the designation ‘Abbey Ale’, which is given to Trappist-style beers that are brewed by anyone other than a member of the Trappist Order.

The Witkap Pater Tripel is a bit lighter in body and alcoholic content than many of the Trappist Tripels, which results in a beer that is much easier to enjoy, without the cloying weight that higher alcohol would bring (most Tripels are in the 9-11%abv range). Another thing that sets the Witkap beers apart from many of their competitors is the relatively high fermentation temperatures that they undergo, typically around 22°C. This higher fermentation temperature results in even more of the fruity esters that are the hallmark of Abbey Tripels, giving the Witkap beers a very distinct lemon chiffon and tropical fruit nose. This ale is only lightly hopped, just enough to provide a balancing bitterness, but not enough for the hops to take a starring role in the finished flavor profile. Tripel refers to the comparative strength of the beer (kind of like the X, XX, and XXX you’d see on old spirits barrels or bottles), not the number of times that the beer has fermented, which is a common misconception (although there are some beers that are fermented three or more times). The Witkap Pater Tripel is actually fermented twice; first in the fermentation tanks, then, following a light centrifuge to clarify, the beer is bottled with a small dose of candy sugar and fresh yeast. This second fermentation in the bottle gives the beer its natural carbonation, which is notably softer and better integrated into the beer than your typical carbonated mass-produced ale. The live yeast in the bottle also means that the beer will continue to mature and develop for several years in the bottle. Like most strong beers, the Witkap is best served at about cellar temperature (50-55°F), and will show its wide array of flavors and aromas best from a wide-mouthed wine or ale chalice.

The Witkap Tripel pours a pale, slightly cloudy straw gold color. Although a bit cloudy, the particulate matter here is considerably finer than that of the Brise-BonBon. The head is pure, white, and leaves a beautiful lace on the glass as you drink the beer. The palate is bright, crisp, and refreshingly citrusy, with flavors of lemon verbena, hay, passionfruit and guava, maybe a hint of lemongrass in the finish. The light weight of the beer will be very evident if you get a chance to try this one side by side with one of the stronger, more traditional Abbey Tripels. It has a vibrancy and light-on-the-palate quality that is almost unheard of in a beer of this strength, almost more reminiscent of a 5%abv Belgian Wit (wheat) beer than an Abbey Tripel. The finish is crisply citrusy and very refreshing, leading me to believe it would be dangerously easy to consume more than a few of these. When looking for a food pairing, think along the lines of a nice Sauvignon Blanc – any food whose flavors would be enhanced by the bright citrus character of that wine would also pair nicely here. Try your Witkap Pater with your favorite lemon-loving seafoods, like steamed mussels or clams, fresh salmon, or any dish with fresh goat cheese.