



Beer of the Month Club

October 2006 Selections

Usually, we offer two beers with a loose Halloween theme in October, but beer number two did not arrive in sufficient quantity to supply the Club, which left us scrambling to find a replacement. We apologize for the tardiness of this month's selections, and the fact that only one of these is even remotely scary!

La Bête des Vosges

Brasserie Artisanale des Vosges, Dommartin-les-Remiremont, Vosges, France

8.0%abv \$5.25/330ml

High in the Vosges Mountains of northeastern France, there lurks a mythic beast known as '*La Bête des Vosges*', or 'The Beast of the Vosges'. Accounts and descriptions of the Beast vary; some describe it as Yeti-like, others say it is a werewolf type creature. Others still describe the Beast as a Chimera- or Sphinx-like creature, an amalgam of other scary beasts, with the head of a wolf, the body of a lion, the claws of a dragon, and a dangerous, curved single horn springing from its forehead. While the descriptions vary, most anyone who has ever visited the region will acknowledge having heard the Beast howling away up in the wooded hills of the Vosges, and locals still use tales of the Beast to scare their children into behaving. Over the last decade or so, France has actually become one of Europe's top celebrators of Halloween, with children trick-or-treating in numbers greater than anywhere else in the world, outside of North America, so selecting a French ale for our October selections makes more sense than you might think.

The Hoffner family have run a small café in the village of Dommartin for generations, but only began to brew their own beer in 2000. Unlike most of the pilsner-style beers brewed in the region of the Vosges and nearby Alsace, the Hoffners have chosen to specialize in ales, taking the strong ales of southern Belgium as their model. The *La Bête des Vosges* is a classic strong amber ale, somewhere between the classics Duvel and Scaldis in style. It is brewed from a selection of lighter malts – pale, crystal, caramel – and an addition of brewers' sugar to add strength. Dried hops are used, but in moderation, and only to provide balance to the rich malt flavors. The water comes from local springs in the Vosges, and a special ale yeast from Belgium is employed for fermentation. This Beast should be served in a brandy snifter or other small vessel that will discourage over consumption (this *is* strong stuff, after all!), and don't drink it too cold, as you will lose some of the complexity of malt flavors.

The *La Bête des Vosges* pours into the glass with a slightly murky dark amber color. Due to the high gravity and low protein content, there is not much of a head to speak of, just a whisper of cream-colored foam around the edge of the glass. The nose here is all about malt sweetness, with big wafts of chocolate covered cherries, prunes, spice cake, and roasted malt. The palate is even fruitier, once again showing plenty of chocolate, malt and intense fruit notes, but slightly drier than you might assume based on the aromas alone. The finish is very long and satisfying, surprisingly quaffable for a beer of such strength. While this Beast is dessert all on its own, you might also try it with one of your favorite desserts, especially one with chocolate and/or dried fruits in the composition.

2006 Brewer's Reserve Farmhouse Ale
Bison Brewery, Berkeley, California
5.5%abv \$6.00/500ml

The Bison Brewpub in Berkeley was one of the first to open in California at the dawn of the modern microbrewery revolution, in 1986. It was an immediate success with the locals, especially the students from Cal, both for their fine beers and the excellent and affordable food. Founder Bill Owens became one of the true pioneers of the new brewing movement, and both a teacher and inspiration for a whole generation of young brewers in the Bay Area. By 1997, Owens was ready to move on, and he found a buyer for the pub in a young brewer named Dan DelGrande. DelGrande had just graduated from the American Brewers Guild, an offshoot of the UC Davis Fermentation Science program, and was looking for an opportunity to make a name for himself in the Micro business. In 2003, the restaurant portion of Bison was shuttered to allow Dan and his team to focus on their beers. They still use the original brewing facility on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley to test and formulate all of their beers, and to brew the draft products, but their bottled beers are now brewed under contract at the Coast Range facility in Gilroy, California.

The Bison Farmhouse Ale is another local rendition of the Belgian Saison or French Farmhouse, (or *Biere de Garde*), style. These beers were historically brewed during the harvest season, and were brewed to a high enough strength to allow them to age and condition well for nine months or so, to be ready to drink by the time the following summer. The idea was for the beer be strong enough to act as a restorative at the middle of a long day on the farm, but not so strong that they interfered with the rest of the days' work. In Belgium, these beers are often spiced with coriander seed, bitter orange peel, and sometimes other spices. The French versions tend to be brewed without spices, but the yeasts involved frequently give them a spicy character, none the less. Bison's Farmhouse Ale is 100% barley malt (the traditional European models are frequently a combination of barley malt and un-malted wheat), but it begins in a rather unique way. DelGrande and his team begin the night before by soaking their malt (mostly two-row, with smaller amounts of caramel and Munich malts) in water, then draining the liquid, and allowing the malt to essentially begin to rot over night. This technique is very similar to the sour mash method used in the production of Bourbon Whiskey, and it is employed to develop rich earth and spice notes in the finished beer. Following this sour mashing, the malt is re-watered, and brewed to release the natural sugars. They then allow the fermentation to run its course quite naturally, resulting in fermentation temperatures in the 90-95°F range – quite high for brewing, but this allows the beer to develop some really interesting estery spice and fruit flavors. This style of beer is generally fairly mildly hopped, in this case using Pacific Gem for bitterness, and a French hop called *Strisselstalt* for aroma. The yeast used for fermentation is a clone of the yeast from the famous Belgian Saison producer DuPont, and it adds the classic hints of clove and spice to the finished beer. Try your Farmhouse Ale from a large wine glass or Belgian Ale chalice, and drink it around cellar temperature (50°F, or so), to fully enjoy the range of flavors that it provides.

The Bison Farmhouse Ale pours into the glass with a slightly cloudy yellow-orange color, and a light and lacy white head. This is live beer, and when the head dissipates, a quick swirl of the glass will bring it right back. The nose is tart and citric, with more than a touch of peppery spiciness, and even a hint of tobacco. It has a very light-bodied attack on the palate, almost floating across the tongue on its own effervescence. There is a lightly astringent quality to the crisp citrus and nectarine flavors, and that earthy note that I took to be tobacco in the nose turns more to earth and leather on the palate. The hops make themselves known in the slightly bitter finish, but if you have the patience to cellar your second bottle for six months to a year, that bitterness should subside, allowing the richness of the malt and the hints of spice to really shine through. Try the Farmhouse Ale with a nice Emmenthaler or Gruyere cheese as part of a ploughmans' lunch, or try it with an Alsatian-themed seafood dish, such as seared Arctic char with a sauce of mustard or dill.