



October 2008

Old Stock Ale 2008

North Coast Brewing Company, Fort Bragg, California

12.5%abv \$13.50/4x12oz

When Mark Ruedrich graduated college in North Carolina with a degree in zoology, he was initially attracted to the north coast of California for reasons other than beer – he came to explore the tide pools of coastal California. After a few years on the west coast, Mark and his wife moved to England. While living in an 800 year old manor house near Dartmoor, he and his wife explored the local pubs and brewing houses, and gradually fell in love with beer, becoming avid home brewers in the process. On their return to the United States, there was one region that really called out to them for its wild beauty and proximity to the ocean – the Mendocino coast.

In 1988, with the help of two friends (one an experienced B&B owner), Mark and his wife opened the North Coast Brewing Company, a small brewery and restaurant located in the bucolic town of Fort Bragg. When the brewpub first opened, they offered homemade food, and a selection of three home-brewed beers: Old No. 38 Stout, Scrimshaw Pilsner, and the brewery's flagship, Red Seal Ale. With expansion of the brewery in 1994, following many awards won at international beer competitions – including being named one of the ten best brewers in the world by the prestigious Beverage Testing Institute – they have now expanded their portfolio to include nine beers that are brewed year-round and a small selection of seasonal specialties. Production is now just over 30,000 barrels per year, although the brewery has the capacity to reach 50,000 barrels.

This is a beer that demonstrates perfectly that you don't need a bunch of exotic ingredients to make a great beer. Modeled after the traditional English 'Old Ale' style, the Old Stock is made using nothing but Maris Otter malt, a type of malt that is common in Britain, but seldom used by American brewers these days, for no apparent reason. It is a malt that is fairly lightly roasted, but offers an amazing depth of flavor complexity. The malt needs to be brewed for a very long time (Mark wouldn't reveal too much!) to extract the amount of sugars needed to produce a beer of this strength. In keeping with tradition, Mark uses only English hops, as well: both Kent Goldings and Fuggles are added during the boil, and the beer is lightly dry-hopped in the fermenter with those same two hops. A traditional English ale yeast is used for fermentation. And that's it. No bells, no whistles, just an amazing beer with only three primary ingredients (not counting yeast and water). The beer is filtered before bottling, so there is no yeast sediment in the bottle, but its strength alone makes for a beer that ages quite well for many years. If I were you – and had more patience and sense than I, personally, possess – I'd drink one this winter, and lay the other three down for aging, trying one each winter with the newly released vintage to compare. This is also a beer that you do not want to serve too cold. When I wrote the tasting note for this beer, I followed its progression from refrigerator temperature all the way up to room temp, and it just continued to get more delicious and complex as it warmed. I'd suggest serving it in a brandy snifter, or similarly shaped glass, at about cellar or cool room temperature, around 55-60°F.

The Old Stock pours a very nice, dark, reddish-copper color. The light beige head is not huge, but it does show some rocky peaks, and leaves a nice lace in the glass. The aromas are huge, with fruitcake and dark bread, notes of dark fruits like figs and dates, even a hint of Port wine, and a slight floral quality, most likely from the hops. It is so huge on the palate, that there is almost no sensation of carbonation on the tongue at all, just a caramel-y richness that coats the mouth. Once again, the dark fruits and fruitcake notes are most prevalent, but there are also hints of spice, roasted malt, and Cognac. The finish is surprisingly dry, considering the flavor profile. This is definitely a strong beer, but it is so well balanced, it barely shows the 12.5% alcohol at all. I have always considered the Old Stock to be more of a dessert beer – as in dessert by itself, not as an accompaniment to sweets – sipped in front of a crackling fire on a cold winter's night, but Mark says it goes great with cheese, as well, and recommends Parmigiano Reggiano, sharp farmhouse cheddars, Colston-Bassett Stilton (he was specific here – I imagine any dry Bleu would suffice!), or the Spanish cheese Valdeon (in general, think cheeses that are fairly sharp and salty). If you are a smoker, I find that the Old Stock also greatly complements a nice cigar after a big Holiday meal.



Mata Hari

Brewster's Brewing Company, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, England

4.8%abv \$6.25/50cl

Brewster is the old English term for a female brewer. Until the arrival of hops in England from Bohemia, beer spoiled fairly quickly. Up to that time, brewing had been done mainly on a very small scale in England by various women, who would sell it to the working men by the pail when they were on lunch break or on their way home at the end of the day. Once hops arrived from Bohemia, and it was found that the addition of hops gave beer a longer shelf life – as well as those bitter, herbal hop flavors – it became possible to ship beer much further distances by barrel, and the brewing industry was soon taken over by larger, commercial concerns, mostly run by men, and female brewers have been rare ever since.

Sara Barton took a Masters degree in brewing at Heriot Watt University, in Edinburgh, Scotland some twenty years ago. Her first job in the industry was with brewing giant Courage, as a Production Manager, but she soon found that commercial brewing did not meet up to her idealistic vision of what being a brewer would be like. So, after achieving an MBA, she switched careers, and went to work in sales for the Eli Lilly Drug Company. The desire to be a brewer never left her altogether, however, and she kept brewing at home during this time. Then, in January of 1998, she decided to return to her first love, and Brewster's Brewery was founded. At first, she only had a five barrel brewing system, so everything was made in very small batches, put in keg by hand, and even sold and delivered to local pubs by Sara herself. By 2002, demand had grown enough for her to double the size of her brewing equipment to ten barrel capacity, allowing her to brew up to 50 barrels per week, but the beers were still draught only, and mostly could only be found locally. Just last year she began bottling, and American Import company Shelton Brothers, who are happy to import even the tiniest amounts of beer if the quality is high enough, started bringing Brewster's products across the Pond. This is Brewster's first appearance on the West Coast.

The Mata Hari is one of a range of beers in Sara's portfolio named to honor famous "Wicked Women" of history. For those that don't recall, Mata Hari was a Dutch courtesan and exotic dancer that was arrested and executed by the French in 1917 for spying for Germany during WWI. Mata Hari (the ale) is essentially an ESB, or Extra Special Bitter. The Bitter is a style of ale distinct to Britain, and most ale breweries there will brew at least one as a part of their lineup. Bitters are generally more malt-driven ales than Pale Ales or IPAs, with the hops used primarily for bittering the ale, not for aroma, as in an IPA. When more than one bitter is produced at a given brewery, the higher gravity beer will be called a 'Best Bitter', and if a third, even stronger ale is added, it is usually labeled as an 'Extra Special Bitter'. The Mata Hari is brewed using exclusively British ingredients, including pale and caramel malt. She will only brew with whole hops – no pellets or extracts – and prefers Northdown, Progress and Fuggles for the Mata Hari. The hops are added during the boil, and no dry-hopping is done, so the hop flavors are fairly subdued, used just for their bittering qualities. A traditional English ale yeast and local spring water are the only other ingredients. This beer is bottle-conditioned, meaning a dash of brewer's sugar and yeast are added to each bottle at bottling time to encourage the second, carbonation-inducing fermentation in the bottle. This means the beer will pour slightly cloudy, but it is also a sign of a 'real' natural ale. Drink your Mata Hari from a traditional pint glass just a little warmer than refrigerator temperature, around 40-45°F, to get the most flavor out of it.

Mata Hari pours into the glass slightly opaque with sediment, but a beautiful copper/apricot color, and a very slight, off-white head that dissipates fairly quickly, leaving only a trace of lace in the glass. The aromas are initially fruity and grainy, with just a hint of hops. Pit fruits, citrus and fresh baked bread all make their appearances, as well as a slight pepper-like spiciness. It has a fairly light body for an ale of its strength, but is fairly full-flavored just the same. Once again, there is a fresh roasted grain quality that is immediately evident, followed by layers of mild fruitiness. The hops are present, but only enough so to provide a balancing bitterness, and they never dominate the flavor profile. The finish is very smooth, almost creamy, and leaves just a hint of hops in its wake. This is a great session beer, and will compliment just about any type of traditional pub grub, but I had mine with a left-over turkey-and-stuffing sandwich, and it was a magical combination, so you might want to try it with a roasted bird of some sort.