



## Beer of the Month Club

September 2006 Selections

### Brother Thelonious Abbey Style Ale

North Coast Brewing Co., Fort Bragg, California

9.0%abv      \$7.50/750ml

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.

With the possible exception of super-hoppy beers, no style of beer or ale brewing has swept the US in the past couple of years with the force of the Belgian Abbey Ale style. Traditionally, these beers were brewed in the Catholic monasteries of northern Europe by the monks themselves, usually as part of their efforts to make their monasteries entirely self-sufficient. In more modern times, these monasteries have begun selling their beers (as well as cheese, bread, and anything else that the monks can make in excess of their own needs) to the public as a way to raise cash funds for building maintenance and charitable works. The beers are usually very strong, and on the heavier side, with rich, malty flavors, and a distinct fruitiness that is a byproduct of the specialized yeast strains that are used for fermentation. Hops are generally used only for their preservative qualities, and rarely make themselves known in the taste of the finished ales. When North Coast decided to make their first 'Abbey-style' ale, they decided to honor one of America's most famous monks – famous Jazz pianist Thelonious Monk. A portion of all sales will benefit music education and performing arts at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. The beer is a classic Abbey style, brewed with an array of richer, darker malts, moderate levels of hops, and a proprietary Belgian yeast strain, the origin of which Mark and his team are very secretive about. It is bottle-conditioned, and should improve with short-term cellaring. Try your Brother Thelonious slightly chilled, in the 55-60°F range, from a large, bowl-shaped glass that gives the ale plenty of room to develop its full aromatic potential.

The Brother Thelonious pours with a deep reddish-mahogany color, and a quickly dissipating, cream-colored head. The aromas are very sweet and malty, with notes of molasses, bread pudding, raisins, and other dried fruits. The palate is surprisingly dry, considering the aromatics, and features similar flavors to the aromatic profile, with the addition of a dry toasty note in the finish. This beer will work great as a winter warmer, as we head into cooler weather, but if you want to try it with food, I'd recommend something rich and heavy, like braised short ribs or osso bucco.

## **Pietra Bière à la Châtaigne**

**Brasserie Pietra, Bastia, Corsica, France**

**6.5%abv      \$12.00/750ml**

Corsica is a fiercely independent island. It has been governed by France for most of the past 200 years, but in its 4000 year history, it has never truly been conquered. Even the Romans never truly controlled Corsica; they only governed from afar, and that was just so they could use the Corsicans' fighting prowess to their own ends. This fierce spirit has made Corsica a fairly violent place at times, due to various separatist nationalist groups, but considerably less so than Basque country, for example. To say the least, the Corsicans enjoy what independence they have achieved. In fact, with its coastal fisheries, mountain meadows full of grazing sheep, and plenty of arable land for grains, fruits, and vegetables, Corsica is virtually self-sufficient, with the exception of fossil fuels.

Corsica is wine country, and has been since the earliest Greek settlers planted the first vines. So, when Dominique Sialelli opened Brasserie Pietra in the northern coastal town of Bastia, in 1996, it was (and still is) Corsica's first and only brewery. Although beer had never been brewed on the island before, the locals took to the beers of Pietra like they would a long-lost native son, and within no time at all, 95% of all the bars and restaurants on the island were proudly pouring the beers of Pietra (not to mention 'Corsica Cola', which is also made at the brewery). In the past few years, Dominique has been able to increase his production to a level large enough to support exports, and the beers of Pietra are now available in major markets in continental Europe, and now, for the first time, the United States. Being loyal to Corsica means that all of the ingredients used in the brewing of the Pietra beers are locally grown on the island, with the exception of the hops, which come from northern Europe in dried form.

Sialelli is originally from the small town of Pietraserena, high in the hills of central Corsica, where the main agricultural products are olives, chestnuts, and sheep ranching. When he opened his brewery, he really wanted to highlight the native ingredients of his homeland, and he eventually decided that chestnuts would be his means to this end (thank goodness he didn't decide to use sheep or olives in his beer!). Each summer, as the chestnut trees – some as old as 150 years – ripen their fruit, bushels of nuts are hauled down to the coast on the backs of donkeys (truly!), where they are dried in warehouses for three to four weeks before being milled into chestnut flour. This flour is then combined with organic barley malt, hops, and local spring water for the boil. The beer is only lightly hopped, to better show the inherent bitterness and nutty flavors of the chestnuts. After the wort is boiled, the house lager yeast is introduced, and the beer is transferred to tank in a temperature controlled cellar, where it undergoes a prolonged eight week fermentation. This very long fermentation period produces a more profound flavor profile than one might expect of a lager beer, with the kind of complexity that one usually encounters only in fine ales. After the fermentation, the beer is lightly filtered, then bottled without Pasteurization. While the bottle is cork-finished, and the beer does appear slightly cloudy, Pietra will not benefit from additional aging in the way that our bottle-conditioned offerings do. Drink your Pietra in a large ale or red wine glass, and drink it around cellar temperature of 55°F to best enjoy its full range of flavors.

The Pietra pours a medium gold-amber, almost chestnut-colored, with a lacy off-white head. It smells much like other strong lagers, with crisp grain notes, a hint of hops, and whiffs of toasted chestnuts. On the palate, the Pietra is bone dry, and slightly smoky, almost like chestnuts roasted over an open fire. There is a definite nuttiness to the flavor profile, and some of the bitterness that would normally come from hops here is a product of the natural tannins in the chestnuts. The finish is quite lingering, and becomes even more nutty as the beer warms in the glass. Try your Pietra as an accompaniment to cheeses and/or patés, or you can do as the Corsicans do, and braise seafood or wild boar in the beer itself.