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Desperately seeking Canadian Breakfast Stout

The fourth best beer in the world -- and only in Michigan

BY SANDRA MACGREGOR, CITIZEN SPECIAL AUGUST 7, 2010

Did you come all the way to Michigan for the beer too?" says the man glancing at my Ontario licence plate as he points to his own. "It's the only reason I ever leave Canada," he adds as he navigates his way through the crowded entranceway of Ann Arbor's Jolly Pumpkin Café and Brewery to grab the last seat at the bar.

Inside, up at the bar, a beer aficionado is introducing some newbies to the fastest growing industry (or art form, as converts will tell you) in Michigan: craft beer.

"On the nose you will smell spice with hints of fruit," he says, to his thirsty, eager students. "And the mouth feel is hoppy but not overwhelming, ending with a smooth bitterness," he adds, describing Jolly Pumpkin's popular Oro de Calabaza beer, recently declared by the New York Times to be the best Belgium-style ale in the world, besting the top Belgian offerings.

Whether or not the initiates' palates have detected such characteristics, the speed with which they down their pints is undoubtedly an enthusiastic endorsement of its taste.

While the rest of the state is going through an economic downturn, Michigan's craft beer industry has experienced double-digit growth over the past two years. And it's growing in the right direction; seven of the top 100 beers in the world, as rated by Beer Advocate, the industry's bible, are found in Michigan, eclipsed only by Belgium and California in number of winning craft brews. Despite the acclaim these brews have garnered, you'll have to cross the border to try them. As yet, none of Michigan's winning brews (or for that matter, any beer from the state's most acclaimed breweries) has ever been available at the LCBO.

But I'm not here for a lesson in beer tasting. I've come to Michigan to track down the elusive, beguilingly named Canadian Breakfast Stout, which according to Beer Advocate, is the fourth best beer in the world; yet it's only available one place on the planet -- on tap at Founders Brewing Company in Grand Rapids.

"The name comes from the fact that it is aged in barrels formerly used

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for maple syrup," explains Sarah Aldrich, marketing assistant at Founders. "Though we don't necessarily encourage you to drink it for breakfast."

"But follow craft breweries and you'll stumble upon dynamic, culturally alive, innovative communities. Craft beer making is a very creative industry."

Proof of such creativity can be found at Grand Rapids' Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, named one of the Top 30 must-see museums in the world by Patricia Schultz, author of 1,000 Places to See Before You Die.

Meijer is currently showcasing the work of renowned glass sculptor Dale Chihuly; indoors and

outside, exotic plantings are deftly paired with fantastical glass forms. The attraction's only shortcoming is that strolling among the displays with a beer is not encouraged.

Luckily, no such prohibition exists at Bell's Eccentric Café in Kalamazoo, a picturesque university town an hour from Grand Rapids. Here, guests are encouraged to enjoy their brews at the pub's outdoor beer garden.

Among wildflowers and apple trees, imbibers have their choice of picnic tables or lounge chairs and, on many evenings, outdoor concerts are held on a makeshift stage.

Bell's, founded in 1985, is Michigan's first craft brewery and continues to dominate the market with award-winning beers. But like all craft breweries in the industry today, explains marketing director Laura Bell, it's not just the brewery's small size and specialty recipes that make craft beer so unique, it's the beverage's accessibility.

"There is no snob factor," says Bell. "And whether you are a fan of sweet or sour or something in between, there's something to suit every taste. That's why I think beer can be more versatile with foods than wine."

Certainly the restaurants of Kalamazoo appear to agree, with several featuring beer-and-food pairings. One of the most popular is the Olde Peninsula Brewpub and Restaurant, which offers a five-course dinner complemented with five different brews.

But Kalamazoo has plenty to offer those not partial to beer, with an Air Zoo that features rides, flight simulations and historical displays. Or work off any indulgences at the Nature Centre with more than 15 kilometres of hiking trails and environmental exhibits.

Just be sure to return to town at night, where, along the patio-lined, pedestrian-friendly side streets, fireflies dart between boisterous diners as they debate the most contentious question in any town that is home to a craft brewery: is it the hops or the yeast that define the draft?

If you go

Getting there: From Ottawa, you can fly to Detroit, then rent a car for the drive to Ann Arbor, about an hour away. Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids are another couple of hours' drive. The drive from Ottawa to Ann Arbor is

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Where to stay:

- Hall House Bed & Breakfast, Kalamazoo: Prices range from \$100 to 150 per night. Call 1-888-761-2525 or see www.hallhouse.com.

- JW Marriott, Grand Rapids:

Rooms are \$169 to \$399 U.S. a night.

Call 1-616-242-1462 or see www.ilovethejw.com.

Where to eat:

- Jolly Pumpkin Cafe & Brewery: 311 S. Main St. Ann Arbor. 1-734-913-2730 or www.jollypumpkin.com/annarbor

- Bell's Eccentric Café: 355 E. Kalamazoo Ave., Kalamazoo. 1-269-382-2332 or see www.bellsbeer.com

- Founders Brewing Company: 235 Grandville SW Grand Rapids. Call 1-616-776-1195 (taproom) or see www.foundersbrewing.com

More info: www.michiganbrewersguild.org

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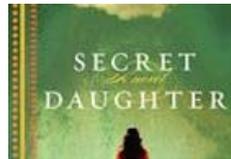
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