

JOURNEYS

South Africa Adds Beer to the Wine List



ABOVE Among craft beer labels are Darling Brew, left, and Triggerfish, right. BELOW Eric van Heerden, owner and brewer of Triggerfish. BOTTOM The countryside around the village of Darling.

By SANDRA MacGREGOR

“THE nose is floral with a touch of citrus on the finish,” said Eric van Heerden as he sniffed from a glass.

We were in the middle of South African wine country, but there wasn’t a vineyard in sight. Surrounded by miles of fallow fields and factories in the industrial area of Somerset West, outside Cape Town, we were instead at a tasting bar in an unassuming, ramshackle building that houses Triggerfish Brewing, one of the newest and brightest developments in South Africa’s craft beer scene.

“Now try this one,” continued Mr. van Heerden, the owner and brewmaster at Triggerfish, as he poured us a sample of his Hammerhead IPA. “This is like my Roman Red on steroids,” referring to his brewery’s hearty amber ale. Judging by the enthusiasm of some of my fellow tasters, a similar injection of vitality is just what the beer industry in South Africa has recently been getting from these specialist brewers.

“We always had great wine here but there was a dearth of what I like to call boutique beers,” said Tadius Bohwasi, a sampler from Cape Town, “but lately the craft brew industry here is booming.” Mr. van Heerden agreed: “Beer drinkers here are finally ready to try something different. It’s time to start stretching the envelope for beer in South Africa.”

Firmly established among oenophiles as one of the world’s top wine producers, until recently South Africa was not likewise held in esteem by beer aficionados. It wasn’t that the country didn’t produce beer — indeed, South Africa is home to South African Breweries Limited, a subsidiary of SABMiller, the world’s second largest beer producer — but rather that the mass-produced brew was regarded by connoisseurs as having as much in common with quality beer as boxed wine does with Bordeaux.

Though the country’s first — and still extremely popular — microbrewery, Mitchell’s, came on the scene in the early 1980s, for the next two decades the craft brew scene in South Africa was relatively stagnant, in large part thanks to SAB’s firmly established market share and affordability. But brewmasters are now doing their best to make up for lost time. In the past few years, microbreweries from across the country — Boston, Napier, Jack Black, Clarens, Triggerfish, Darling, Brewers & Union, Birkenhead, Saggy Stone, Robson’s, Drayman’s — have established themselves as among South Africa’s top purveyors. Even the big boys at SAB have begun to try their hands at microbrewing, producing special, limited-run craft brews for local beer festivals.

And South Africans’ thirst for craft brews shows no signs of being slaked anytime soon. Over the next year or so the number of independent breweries in the country will nearly double, with the establishment of labels like Devil’s Peak, Royal Mzansi, Valley Brewery and Gallows Hill.

Indeed, beer has long roots in the region, predating even wine. The first commercial beer in what is now South Africa was brewed in Newlands, just outside Cape Town on the banks of the Liesbeek River in 1658 (wine production didn’t begin until a year later); one of SAB’s breweries still sits at this auspicious spot.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER BAUERMEISTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Looking and Tasting

TOURS

Check for tour times. The **Cape Town Beer Route** tour (70 Wale Street, Cape Town; 27-21-424-3572; coffeebeansroutes.com) runs Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. Tours are 695 rand, about \$87 at 8 rand to \$1.

BREWERIES

Triggerfish Brewing (Unit 9 Paardevlei, Intersection of de Beers Avenue and Broadway, Somerset West; 27-21-851-5861; facebook.com/triggerfishbrewer). There is no charge and tours include free tastings.

Clarens Brewery (Shop 1, Rosemary Centre, 326 Main Street, Clarens; 27-82-901-4700; clarensbrewery.co.za). Tours

are available free of charge.

Mitchell’s Brewery (No 3 Arend Street, Knysna Industrial Area, Knysna; 27-44-382-4685). Tours are 60 rand, tastings included.

Saggy Stone (Amandalia Farm, Agtervinkrivier, Cape Winelands, Western Cape; 27-83-453-3526; saggystone.co.za). Free brewery tours available by appointment only.

South African Breweries, Newlands Brewery (3 Main Road, Newlands, Cape Town; 27-21-658-7511; newlandsbrewery.co.za). Tour reservations are required; 30 rand, including two drinks.

Valley Brewery (20 Fish Eagle Park, 7975 Kommetjie, Western Cape; 27-83-709-6759; facebook.com/valleybrewery.com). Tours and tastings, reservations required, are free.

BARS

Banana Jam Cafe (157 Second Avenue, Cape Town; 27-21-674-0186; bananajamcafe.co.za) offers the best selection of craft beers in Cape Town.

Chalkboard Collaboration Café (286 Fox Street, Johannesburg; 27-87-830-0445; thebioscope.co.za/chalkboardcafe). Attached to an independent cinema, this cafe offers about 20 craft brews.

EVENTS AND INFORMATION

We Love Real Beer Craft Beer Festival, Sept. 28 NeighbourGoods Market (Old Biscuit Mill, Woodstock, Cape Town; facebook.com/weloverealbeer).

The **Craft Beer Project** Web site (thecraftbeerproject.co.za) has information on the country’s beer festivals and other brew-related news.

The proliferation of boutique breweries has fostered several beer festivals in recent years: the Cape Town Festival of Beer (capetownfestivalofbeer.co.za), We Love Real Beer Festival (facebook.com/weloverealbeer), and the Clarens Craft Beer Festival (clarensbeerfestival.co.za). They all offer affordable tastings from microbreweries from across the country (some of which are not yet available in stores or pubs), demonstrations on how to make your own beer, and ale-infused snacks. Craft beers on tap and beer-and-food pairings have become a must at restaurants like Banana Jam Cafe in Cape Town and Chalkboard Collaboration Café in Johannesburg. And organized trails like the KwaZulu-Natal Beer Route, which directs visitors to some of that province’s most interesting breweries, are hoping to divert some traffic from the country’s ubiquitous wine scene.

What many breweries do have in common with South Africa’s wineries is an unparalleled landscape. Though some microbreweries are centered in or

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near Cape Town and Johannesburg, many are in idyllic small towns hours from any urban center, offering a good excuse for beer-loving travelers to discover beautiful parts of the country not often seen by tourists.

My personal tour of craft breweries led me to the tiny town of Napier (home to the brewery named for the town), about two hours southeast of Cape Town, where I saw fields dotted with the rare blue crane; I stopped in nearby Cape Agulhas, at Africa’s southernmost tip, to dip my feet in the ocean. A trip to the village of Darling (location of Darling Brew), an hour north of Cape Town, was rewarded with a sighting of a geometric tortoise, one of the most endangered tortoises in the world and found only in this area, as well as fields of spectacularly colorful wildflowers. I survived a fog-heavy drive along the steep Long Tom Pass in the Mpumalanga Province to reach Hops Hollow Brew Pub, situated at a stunningly high elevation.

“We’ve got great stories to tell about beer,” said Iain Harris, the founder of the Cape Town Beer Route, the first route of its kind, as such an homage to hops as to history. The route began with a tour of SAB’s Newlands Brewery, opened in 1820, then it was off to Banana Jam Cafe, where the owner, Greg Casey, conducted a tasting of various microbrews.

Finally we headed to Langa, a township on the outskirts of Cape Town, to visit a tavern run out of the home of Nkosazana Mbono. Ms. Mbono has been making umqombothi, a traditional South African beer, for decades from her family’s centuries-old recipe; corn, sorghum malt and yeast are combined and left to sit overnight. After she demonstrated how umqombothi is made, we all shared sips from a communal tub and enjoyed a taste of South Africa’s original craft beer — one now joined by dozens of worthwhile brews. ■

Bites

LONG GRAIN Camden, Me.

The critic Jonathan Gold created a sensation when, in a 2000 edition of Gourmet magazine, he anointed the Las Vegas restaurant Lotus of Siam the “single best Thai restaurant in North America.” That Siam’s chef refused to dumb down flavors for American palates was thrilling to Mr. Gold and his readers. What added to this real frisson of excitement was that this unparalleled kitchen sat in an unassuming joint off the Vegas Strip.

You get that same feeling when you

take your first bite of the chewy, slightly charred broad noodles at Long Grain, in Camden, on the central Maine coast. The picturesque village is where you expect lobster rolls and bowls of chowder, not superior Thai cuisine.

And yet, here it is, thanks to the husband-and-wife owners, Ravin Nakjaroen and Paula Palakawong. After the economic downturn forced them to close Four Rivers, their high-end Thai spot in Fort Lauderdale, they came north — not to open another Thai restaurant, but to help run the kitchen of one of those charming Maine inns that serves lobster and chowder. The inn soon closed, but they liked the town. So in August 2010, they opened Long Grain on Camden’s main drag.

The 30-seat restaurant is attractive

but spare; the décor consists of a few Edison bulbs and one wall prettily papered in rose and gold. The real excitement comes via Mr. Nakjaroen’s food made with ingredients sourced from the Maine coast but reflecting flavors of his native Bangkok. Those broad noodles, pad kee mao, have nothing in common with the saucy, bland drunken noodles you find on many Thai menus. Mr. Nakjaroen makes his in-house and stir-fries them with seasonal, local greens (red and green kale on a recent visit), hen-of-the-woods mushrooms and Thai basil until the edges start to crisp, in the style of grandmothers all over Thailand.

The standard Thai beef salad is also elevated by fresh, local ingredients, in this case mesclun greens and beef so tender you can cut it with a spoon.



JANE BLACK

Plump Pemaquid mussels are bathed in a coconut lemon grass broth that buzzes from a generous dollop of roasted chili jam.

Even dessert, generally an afterthought in Thai restaurants, is exceptional here: Mr. Nakjaroen’s signature is a coconut flan with a crackle-crisp, bittersweet crust served atop fragrant black rice pudding.

Locals have embraced Long Grain for this level of quality, as well as reasonable prices (nothing on the menu costs more than \$16). At 6 p.m. on a recent Thursday, every table was taken or reserved — though it’s possible they might find room for Mr. Gold should he decide to test his proclamation.

Long Grain, 31 Elm Street, Camden, Me; (207) 236-9001. An average meal for two, without drinks or tip, is about \$40. Reservations recommended.

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