

# DISCOVERIES & DIVERSIONS

## The Cuvée of the Day: Blending in Beer

**T**he barrel room at **CASCADE BREWERY BARREL HOUSE** in Portland is a dark and quiet place where hundreds of barrels full of beer silently await their beautiful destiny. Beer aficionados consider it sacred ground: a magic and holy place. Ron Gansberg thinks of it as a studio, the salon where he blends carefully aged brews, concocting some of the most highly coveted beers in the Northwest.

Barrel-aging beer is an imperfect science. Even for a craft beer doyen like Gansberg, the brewer, blender and chief imagineer at Cascade Brewing Barrel House, there is always some uncertainty when laying down beer for months of conditioning and transformation. Often, the result requires blending with other beers (barrel-aged or not) to produce the final offering.

None of this is news, especially not for people with a penchant for old-world beer styles and barrel-aged beers. However, blending beers is not an exercise reserved exclusively for the barrel-room or the brewery.

Beer fundamentalists find the practice of blending finished beers to be sacrilege. To them, the libations that beer swamis create behind the magic curtain are already perfect. Brewers are gods and thus their creations sacred. Some beer drinkers are a bit more liberal and today an increasing number of beer-savvy bartenders dabble in the art of blending craft beers to satisfy an audience singularly focused on flavor.

Burc McFarlen is one of the owners of **THE BEER AUTHORITY** in Seattle, where he often operates the taps. As a barkeep, he has developed a reputation for his blending prowess.

"Some of my regular customers walk in and ask what I'm blending today," he tells me while at his bottle shop. "They call it *the cuvée of the day*."

The act of blending beers off the tap is nothing new. Many people are familiar with the black-n-tan, which in its most traditional form blends **GUINNESS STOUT** with **HARP LAGER**. In England, publicans have served the half-n-half for ages: a blend of bitter and mild ales. Today's vast mosaic of craft beer, and the flavors they present, gives bartenders more options.

"You have to consider what you are trying to produce," McFarlen says as he hands me a glass of one-third imperial stout blended with two-thirds imperial IPA. "If you are trying to emphasize the hop character, you need to use more of the IPA and less of the stout."

According to McFarlen, blending is all about balancing flavors. For example, he introduces reluctant customers to the world of sour beers by blending a sour beer with a sweeter beer to balance out the tartness. "One of my favorite blends

is **MORT SUBITE BLANCHE** and **SOUTHERN TIER**

**CHOKLAT STOUT**," he says. "All it takes is just a bit of the chocolate beer to balance out the tartness of the white Lambic."

McFarlen admits that, at times, there is an economic component to the art of blending. "I had a keg of cherry-chocolate stout that was moving slower than desired," he notes. "Not a bad beer, just really sweet. I'd give people a taste of it and they'd shake their heads, but when I started blending it with imperial porter, they loved it."

Not only was McFarlen able to salvage what would have otherwise been a wasted keg, his customers were able to enjoy what they were drinking. In the end, appreciating the beer you're drinking is all that really matters. ●

