

Hank Speaks... So Listen by Hank Bienert

The heat...the incredible heat...it's Old Testament punishment (AKA New Orleans summer) and some in their delirium turn to SOUR BEERS



MAGIC BREW | Pucker-inducing lambic comes to ferment without yeast.

IN CRAFT BEER, a world lit mostly by hype, sour beers burn brightest. An acquired taste for most but a life's pursuit for a devoted few, sours command long lines and high prices when they appear at bars and shops—which they rarely do. Behind the fans, collectors and cultish online forums are relatively simple brews that get their uniquely puckering flavors not from boutique ingredients but from humble bacteria more commonly found in pickles, vinegar and rustic sourdough bread. Brewers dose a basic beer, like saison or stout, with acid-producing microbes, then age it, often in barrels and sometimes with fruit, to produce flavors that range from balsamic- to floral.

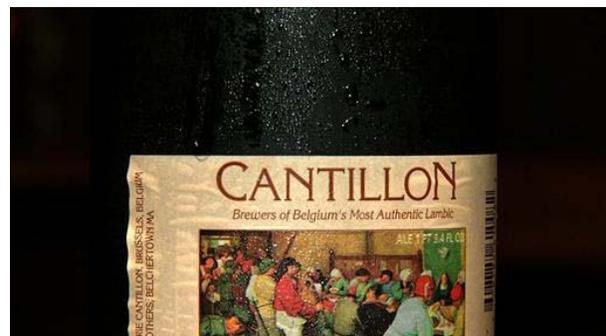
Who doesn't love a sour beer? While not always popular in the US, sour beers, including the Belgian favorite the lambic, are more and more

popular. Beer expert Jimmy Carbone, owner of Jimmy's No. 43 in New York, explains what makes a sour beer sour.

And then there's lambic. Far simpler and far more rare, the king of sours is made by only a handful of traditional Belgian breweries in a centuries-old process called spontaneous fermentation. More sorcery than science, it was never practiced here—until now.

I tasted my first American lambic in the woods north of Portland, Maine, in a rough-hewn shack behind the Allagash brewery, best known for its crisp, lemony White beer. There, members of an adventurous sect of American brewers are creating an astonishing and ancient beer anew.

“More sorcery than science, it was never practiced here—until now.” Most breweries today are part-factory, part-lab: whirring bottle-fillers, gleaming steel tanks and tangled pipes. Allagash is no different. Except for that shed, a small and simple building made from raw wood beams and salvaged church windows. Inside sits the koelschip, the engine of sour-beer production. Based on Belgian tradition, it's basically a shallow steel bathtub. On brew days in the spring and fall, the shack's windows are swung open, unfermented beer is pumped into the tub, left to cool overnight in the breeze and poured into barrels the following morning. And then, the brewers wait.



Brewers typically make beer by fermenting a sweet, grainy nectar called wort with specific strains of yeast. When they add nothing, as lambic-makers do, the untreated wort becomes a refuge for airborne

wild microflora, which now have space to grow and food that would otherwise be hogged by beer yeast to eat. If conditions are exactly right, the wort ferments on its own, as if by magic. Spontaneous fermentation may not be a new method—lambic recipes go back to the 1300s—but it's new here. Like Champagne or Stilton, the name binds product and place (the Belgian town of Lembeek was an early brewing hub). For years, sour beer meant lambic; lambic meant Belgium. Then, in 2006, Allagash founder Rob Tod flew to Brussels along with a few beer-industry colleagues, filled a journal with tasting notes and designed his shack.

Lambic-style beers can take years of aging and careful blending of multiple batches before they're ready to drink. But old as they are, these beers taste mind-blowingly fresh, bright and vibrant. Allagash's Resurgam, star of what they call the Coolship series of lambic-style beers, is clean and tart with an effervescent strawberry finish. Balaton, made with local cherries, is a slice of syrupy roadside-diner pie. American lambics are a small but varied bunch. Vinnie Cilurzo of Santa Rosa, Calif.-based brewery Russian River was on that fateful trip with Mr. Tod; he built a koelschip in his brew pub this winter. Beatification, his so-called "sonambic" (a lambic from Sonoma County, get it?) is edgy and dry, with hints of grapefruit rind.

Want a taste? That's a challenge. Russian River and Allagash release their sour beers in few-hundred-bottle runs with little warning besides a tweet. The latest Resurgam emerged in July; Russian River should have a new batch by early next year. It's hard to plan a schedule around wild yeast. Mr. Cilurzo releases Beatification "when it tastes right," he said. "It's best to let the beer talk to you, instead of trying to control it."

When these beers talk, what do they say? That tradition transplanted becomes something new. Belgian brewers have generations of experience making lambics. Messrs. Cilurzo and Tod, along with those they're inspiring, are in uncharted territory. "I'm just trying to make something that tastes good," Mr. Cilurzo says. "I don't know what I'm looking for yet."

Five sour beers to seek out:

Russian River Beatification, 5.5% ABV Russian River's "sonambic" is aggressively sour, exploding with grapefruit rind and finishing with a mineral, peppercorn-inflected bite.

New Belgium Tart Lychee, 8.5% ABV From the Colorado brewery that introduced Americans to Belgian beer 21 years ago, a new take on an old style: French-oak-aged sour beer mellowed with a kiss of sweet, nutty litchi and earthy cinnamon.

Jolly Pumpkin La Roja, 7.2% ABV Deep, dark and dirty, Michigan-made La Roja is earthy and moist, illuminated by sparkling shafts of lemon, cherry and sour plum.

Rodenbach Grand Cru, 6% ABV This classic example of the Flemish take on sour beer (typically darker and fruitier than lambics) is rich and warming, like chocolate-covered cherries, with the sweet-and-sour, balsamic vinegar kick of acetic acid.

Allagash Resurgam, 6.6% ABV Allagash blends one-, two- and three-year-old batches from its backwoods koelschip into this spectacular beer: bright and zesty, impossibly fresh-tasting, with wisps of flowers and earth, and a hint of strawberry shortcake.