

## BEECHWOOD AGING by Mike Retzlaff

We've all read the can or bottle labels or heard the slogan on a TV advertisement - "Beechwood Aging" in connection to Budweiser Lager. So . . . what does it actually mean?

I remember a short program on TV, some years ago, showing a brewery worker climbing into a bright tank at one of the Bud breweries to clean out some wooden slats after the beer was pumped out. It looked like a small wood pile neatly coated with a mass of sludge.

I was left with the impression that beechwood aging was their special technique like wine vintners use oak barrels to help mellow their wine during maturation. *Au contraire, mon frère!*

Beechwood is the traditional material chosen to make baking peels and other culinary tools because it imparts no odor or flavor – hot or cold. It is chosen for this stage of brewing for the same reason.

---

## CLARIFYING CHIPS

From American Handybook of Brewing 1902

While in storage, a sound beer becomes clearer by degrees, the particles making it turbid, as yeast and other suspended matters, especially albuminoids, settling on the bottom. In order to hasten clarification and make it perfect, clarifying chips are put into the beer where filters are not used.

These chips are made of hazel or white beechwood. The wood is cut so as to secure straight chips about 16 to 18 inches long, 1.5 to 2 inches wide, and 1/16 to 1/10 inch thick. They should be smooth and without cracks. Before using them they are thoroughly boiled in a special tub, changing the water repeatedly, steam that is pure and without oil or other impurities being commonly used, whereupon they are rinsed in cold water. They are wet when put into the storage cask, being inserted either into the empty cask through the manhole, which is simple and quick, or being added through the bung-hole after the cask has been filled with beer. The beer is run on the chips if it is to be marketed soon, whereas it is preferable to insert the chips through the bung-hole if the beer is to remain on storage for some time. They can be put in two to four weeks before racking for shipment, in the latter case. As to the number of chips for a cask a little experience will speedily give the requisite information. The more quickly the beer is to be clarified and the more stubborn it is of clarification the more chips should be used. As a rule one kilogram of wet chips is enough for one hectoliter of beer, which is equal to about half a kilogram of dry chips. Care should be taken to prevent chips lying in front of the tap-hole, which might cause trouble in racking. This is more likely to happen where the beer is run on the chips and for that reason experienced brewers generally prefer to put in the chips through the bung-hole or else remove the chips from the tap hole after the cask has been filled.

---

It appears that the use of "Beechwood Aging" is not an innovation of Anheuser-Busch but a tried and true clarification aid; at least for use in the keg. Today there is a practical reason to continue this technique. It helps remove a goodly portion of the suspended yeast so they can get a longer run of beer through the filters just before packaging. "Beechwood Aging" apparently has nothing to do with flavor or "drinkability" as their advertisements suggest, but I must admit it does sound good.

As a snub to us fancy schmancy beer sniffers and home-brewers, this is how AB brews "some golden suds the hard way." Perhaps they might try another slogan: "Our beer is sterile filtered to remove most of the color and all of that nasty old beer flavor." Besides, when Bubba's guzzling, flavor and aroma just get in the way!