

## Hank Speaks... So Listen

By Hank Bienert

"Tis the season to relax and sip some of the barley wine you, like me, made in the Spring of 2010, oh, didn't make it or were so greedy to claw open the bottle with your shaking fingers you couldn't wait and had to guzzle it before it had reached the mature stage? Guess you'll have to buy some so here are some choices.

**IF BEER HAS A SEASON**, we're in it. Bold flavors taste best in crisp air—a Jackson Pollock on a stark white wall—but beer's autumnal ties are more than aesthetic. Late fall marks the historic start of the brewing cycle, and the release of the king of beers: barley wine. Before refrigeration, brewers relied on winter's chill to keep fermentation slow and consistent. They started with barley wine, a potent harvest feast in a glass. First made in 18th-century England with extra helpings of floral Kent hops and coal-kilned pale malt to help them last through spring and beyond, barley wines were born kicking, branded with names like Crackskull and Dragon's Milk.

### The King of Beers

Then, as now, they're pricey. In fact, when Napoleonic-era bickering with France threatened England's claret imports, Lords kept their country manors stocked with strong beer, "to answer the like purpose of wine," attests one old brewing handbook. They sipped from elfin glasses, etched with hop vines, and warmed their beer fireside. (Not too close: One over-eager boozier noted his drink "flared up like whisky.")

Extra-pale versions became today's IPAs. Arctic explorers packed darker "winter warmers" that were "as nourishing as beefsteak," in the words of early-20th-century beer writer William Henry Beable, and, crucially, hard to freeze. Today, Boulder, Colo.-based Avery has called its Hog Heaven an "imperial red." Whatever the nomenclature, barley wines are strong enough to last years without turning sour; most benefit from a mellowing rest. J.W. Lees barley wines from the 1980s are, according to some, just starting to peak.

In the U.S., barley wine has grown stronger, trading dainty English hops for high-octane American strains. Some, like Firestone-Walker's **Helldorado**, are light and subtle. But most pack wallops, bracing as bourbon when young, sage as good Sherry when aged. At Denver's Great Divide, head brewer Taylor Rees likes his bitter **Old Ruffian** fresh off the line, but he prefers his buttery **Hibernation** with a year on it, "when those tobacco and chocolate flavors turn fruity and caramel." So stock up for this Thanksgiving and save a few bottles for next year, too.

And even more from your roving reporter...

Anchor **Old Foghorn** 8-10% ABV Brewed in SF since 1975, it is the first runnings from a double drained mash, the second being Anchor's Small Beer.

Avery **Hog Heaven** 9.2% ABV A tribute to puckering Columbus hops, this flagship beer is a grapefruit smoothie, fresh from the brewery but after being aged for 2 years, becomes luscious and floral, like "butter toffee eaten in a garden of lilies".

Brooklyn **Monster Ale** 10.1% ABV Made with rich bready English Maris Otter malt and bright citrusy American Cascade hops, it packs a rich, lava like heat even after years in the cellar.

Stone **Old Guardian** 11.8% ABV From a brewery known for provocative product, it this surprisingly mature resonant beer. A blooming balance, a resinous blood orange syrup.

Great Divide **Hibernation** 8.7% ABV Tart and smooth with a hint of smoke and fruit pudding. Darker and richer than the rest, it would be reward for an Arctic hike (which I MIGHT be exploring soon based on CCH's budget) or a complement for any holiday feast.