

Hank Speaks and speaks and ...

A few issues ago I mentioned that upon cleaning out some old files I happened upon a moldy beignet and wondered what beer made from that would taste like. As this article I send shows, it looks like others have taken the same route.

Craft brewers tap flavors from lobsters to grasshoppers - no surprise to a people like us Lousianians who enter the swamps and woods singing "We will eat it before it eats us"

Double, double, toil and trouble. Check what's in your next craft lager. It may not be eye of newt or toe of frog. But it could be close. Hoping to stand out in a competitive market, brewers are throwing all kinds of things into the kettle: broth from a caramelized moose's head, bull testicles, grasshoppers and a pinch of yeast from a beer maker's beard. Yes...that's right...his beard.

To an outsider, product brainstorming sessions might sound like drunken confabs. But they have yielded some of the following: Mamma Mia Pizza Beer made with real margherita pizzas - Mamma Mia Pizza Beer is made by steeping margherita pizza like a tea bag in the beer mash. Cerealiously Count Chocula brewed with Count Chocula cereal; and Imperial Doughnut Break ale sweetened with a thousand glazed doughnuts. "This market can't get enough insane stuff," said Randy Mosher, author of "Radical Brewing." "We actually brewed a beer with grasshoppers. We sold the beer out right away."

The fad has nearly caused a barroom brawl in the beer world. For thousands of years, brewers used spices, herbs and other ingredients to flavor beer. That largely came to an end in the 1500s when the Duke of Bavaria, the cradle of beer making, passed what is known as the German purity law. A version of the law, which is still in effect, limits beer to just four ingredients: water, hops, malt and yeast. Throwing lobsters into the boil, like Delaware-based Dogfish Head Craft Brewery did this year for its Choc Lobster beer? Forget it. It is "a terrible idea," said Rodger Wegner, who heads the Association of Beer Exporters for North, West and Southwest Germany. The association's website states: "only the pure stuff gets the thumbs up."

The Germans aren't the only ones scoffing at American craft beer. Budweiser this year blasted it in a Super Bowl ad, suggesting flavored beers were for snobs and sissies. Even some craft brewers worry their peers may be stirring up, as Shakespeare put it, "a charm of powerful trouble." If a craft brew is loaded with attention-getting ingredients that are too "disgusting...you're not going to have another," says Jared Rouben, who made black truffle beer at Chicago's Moody Tongue Brewing Co.

Dogfish Head founder Sam Calagione, a pioneer of bizarre brews, disagrees. The German purity law is a "modern form of art censorship," he says. He began mixing raisins and vanilla into his beer more than a decade ago. Eventually, he upped the ante. He says he even tried brewing with pond scum one year in hopes of making a naturally green beer for St. Patrick's day.

"It was definitely green," Mr. Calagione said. "But it tasted like pond scum."

The lobster experiment fared better. In an effort to reinvent oyster stout, a traditional, Victorian-style dark beer, he dropped more than a dozen lobsters harvested near Dogfish Head, Maine, in a boil kettle. The resulting Choc Lobster, which Mr. Calagione said "tasted like the best parts of the ocean: briny and intense," won silver medal at the 2014 Great American Beer Festival.

Only the company's Beer for Breakfast—brewed with coffee, maple syrup and scrapple, a mushy loaf of ground pig livers and hearts—sold out faster. Beer for Breakfast and Choc Lobster are so popular, Mr. Calagione said the brewery is mixing them to create "the first surf and turf, black and tan."

Denver-based Wynkoop Brewing Co. put a different spin on oyster stout, swapping sea oysters with so-called Rocky Mountain oysters, which is what Westerners call bull testicles. The company says it puts the fresh testicles directly into the boiling malt to create a beer with flavors ranging from roasted barley and coffee to chocolate and nuts.

If a beer that ballsy isn't for you, how about an insect beer? Chicago's 5 Rabbit Cerveceria brewed its El Chapulin Colorado beer with grasshoppers, a common bar food in Southern Mexico, to give it an aroma "a bit like fresh cigarette tobacco," said author Mr. Mosher, who is also an instructor at the Siebel Institute of Technology, which teaches brewing education.

For its Beard Beer, Rogue Ales used yeast specimens from brew master John Maier's beard. The strange ingredients are being poured into beer partly to compensate for the limits of brewing yeast. For centuries, beer making has depended on just two species of yeast—developed through experimentation into hundreds of variations. But the new breed of craft brew masters don't have time or patience to follow old rules in a market so competitive that dozens of new breweries are popping up each month in old gas stations, churches and baseball parks.

Rogue Ales and yeast manufacturer White Labs teamed up four years ago to find new yeasts. They culled specimens from fields and a fish-processing table near the Oregon brewery. But White Labs founder Chris White said the only brew-worthy yeast came off hair plucked from brew master John Maier's sprawling, Duck Dynasty - style beard.

It became the key ingredient in Beard Beer, a brew Mr. White said has the sharp flavor of Belgian beer and tastes "like chewing on a Band-Aid." Rogue President Brett Joyce said "bananas are the flavors" he gets from the beer.

Researchers at North Carolina State University are using bugs to try to identify new yeasts. "We're not the grossest," said Anne Madden, a postdoctoral researcher and self-proclaimed yeast wrangler. Last year, Dr. Madden began scraping bug cells she calls "bug slushies" off wasps and bumblebees. She put them in petri dishes and fed them ingredients beer would like. Two yeast species emerged—one made a sour beer and another made a honey beer.

The researchers are patenting the samples and looking for more yeast. They hope the new species will put the genie back in the beer bottle and get brewers to flavor beer with yeast rather than radical ingredients. Mr. Calagione admires the North Carolina State work but compares flavoring exclusively with yeast to driving a car in first gear. "It will get you from point A to point B, but it's not going to be as exhilarating as having five gears," he said. He is already moving onto his next project, collaborating with celebrity chef Mario Batali to discourage food waste by brewing a beer from decaying produce. It will be featured in a new Web series he's calling, "That's odd...Let's drink it!"