

A SOURING TREND

Brace yourself for the latest beer boom BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

The claim is everywhere: It's sour beer's time. A *Portland Monthly* story on Oregon's new masters of brew says, "To the truly devoted beer geeks, tart, barrel-aged beers are the next IPAs." A *New York Times* story in early June appealingly described the flavors of some sour beers as "combinations of sweetness, tart acidity, fruit, earth, cloves and barnyard funk," while the *L.A. Times* caught on to the trend a year ago. "Is sour the new hoppy?" asks a recent post on the smart Portland beer blog Beervana.

"Sour and wild beers are definitely an up-and-coming trend in the beer world, and I think that brewers are quickly finding that their appeal is not limited to just a tiny niche market," says Ben Edmunds, cofounder of Portland's Oregon Beer Odyssey, which offers beer classes (including one on sour beers).

Oregon brewers aren't all leaping to brew sours, which Edmunds says are labor and time intensive. "A batch that is sitting getting funky and sour takes up (valuable) space in a brewery tank or barrels that could be used to produce a different beer," he points out. "So, while the market for sour beers is growing, I think there are some limitations as to how 'big' a trend it can ultimately become."

But some Oregon breweries are making a habit of it. Brewer Curtis Bain says Cascade Brewing has been working on sours for about five years; there are several in their regular lineup, including a bright, strong apricot ale. "We're definitely not the most sour beer out there," he says, "and I don't care. I don't think either of us [Bain or head brewer Ron Gansberg] care. We never got caught up in the hops arms race where we made the most hoppy beer; we've always strived for a sense of balance."

Though Bain agrees that sour beers are a growing trend — he rattles off a list of Oregon breweries working with sours, including Bridgeport,

Deschutes and Block 15 — he doubts they're going to overcome the booming IPAs any time soon. It's a sentiment echoed by Chip Hardy, who owns the Bier Stein with his wife Christina. "It's probably the smallest section of the craft brew market," Hardy says. "It's like the connoisseur of the connoisseur enjoys sour beer. It's not like something you can hand to the person who loves drinking IPAs and expect them to love that too, because it's completely different."

Hardy says his employees love sour beers and frequently suggest them to customers looking for something new. He and Jeff Moores, of the new beer shop Sixteen Tons, both mention that the flavor profiles of sour beers sometimes appeal to non-beer drinkers, or to wine fans. "From oak tannins to dark fruits ... these are things that are typically described in wines, and they are now being described in sour beers," Hardy says.

Few Oregon breweries are bottling sours, but you can find several Cascade varieties, Bridgeport's Stumptown Tart (which gets its kick from fruit — raspberries this year

— not the bacteria or yeasts used in other sours) and Upright Brewing's seasonal sour, Four Play, when it's available. Four Play is used in Oregon Beer Odyssey's sour beer class "to talk about the flavor and character of Brettanomyces, the wild yeast responsible for many of the dark, funky flavors of these beers," says OBO's Edmunds. In contrast, OBO features Cascade's beers, which use "a high concentration of lactobacillus bacteria," to discuss the aging and blending that yields the complex flavors of sour beers.

Upright brewer Gerritt Ill says, "We try to release as many sours as we can, but ... it's very time consuming, and it's kind of unpredictable." Sour beers age in barrels, and Ill says, "You kind of have to keep tasting, and if it

just doesn't really taste right, it's not like you dump it. You just say, 'Oh, let's wait another six months and see what happens.'"

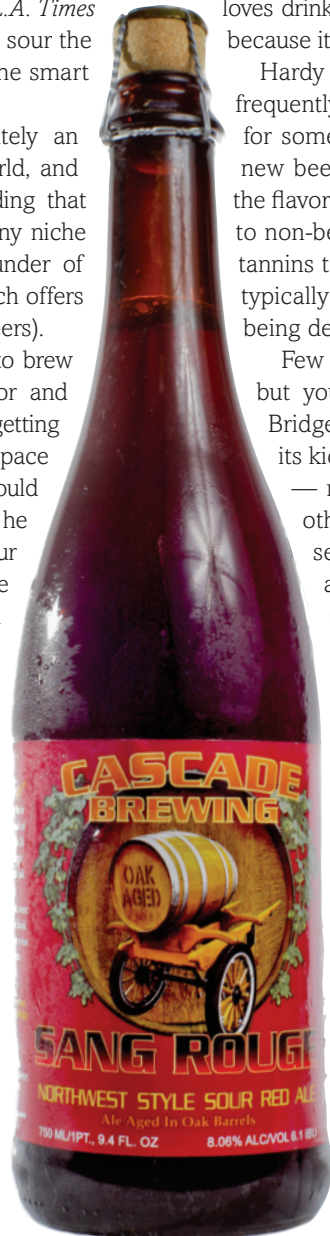
Ill says he thinks sour beers are "hugely" taking off, but he draws the same conclusions about the limits of the style's popularity: "Do I think it'll become as popular as, say, IPA? Probably not." He connects the trend with the growing community of craft beer drinkers and the willingness of bigger breweries to work with the yeasts and bacteria that make sour beers what they are.

Sixteen Tons' Moores sees the rising popularity of sour beers as just another step on the path beer drinkers take as their palates develop. "In Oregon, people have a history of drinking good beer. I think they start at an earlier age," he says. "People's palates are developed really quickly, and they're really interested in this whole range of flavors."

As more breweries begin producing sour beers, there'll be even more flavors to explore. Before long, Oakshire Brewing may also have a sour — though brewmaster Matt Van Wyk prefers the term "wild beer."

"The yeasts and organisms used to produce these beers don't always make beers sour," he says. "They could bring out aromas of leather, tobacco, cherry pie, fruit, horse blanket, funky barnyard, amongst others. Sourness is not always the final goal." Oakshire is in what Van Wyk calls the "experimental and exploratory phase" of a barrel program, aging beers in different barrels for various lengths of time. "These beers can take anywhere from a couple of months to three years or more," he says. "When is it done? Well, that depends. The beer will tell you when it is done, and we just keep trying it to see how it is maturing." Oakshire has released some bourbon-barrel aged beers and should have more later in the year, but Van Wyk says the wild beers will take "a bit."

In beer, as in everything, patience is a virtue. ■



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