

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Fort George's Festival of Dark Arts is a choose-your-own-stout adventure

Review and photos by
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Something was afoot Saturday afternoon, Feb. 18 in downtown Astoria. Despite the drizzle, an effervescence prevailed. The sidewalks were dotted with throngs of young, hip-but-appropriately-weather-clad professionals, all wide-eyed and a little louder, friendlier and sudsier than usual. They were streaming to and from the Fort George campus for the hallowed Festival of Dark Arts.

Approaching Duane Street, the thrum grew. Music blared from speakers and second-story windows. Crowds gathered under tents and spilled from one building to the next, all cradling little snifters sloshing with black brew.

At the entrance, along with the snifter, ticket holders were presented a handful of wooden tasting tokens (12) and an elegantly designed passport — a festival guidebook. “February is Stout Month at Fort George Brewery,” the introduction read. “The shortest and darkest month is the perfect time to showcase the immense variety hidden within this style of beer.” Indeed, the timing is right — February is the nadir of the North Coast’s incessantly dreary winters. And like so many who get creative when pounding weather locks us in, Fort George’s preferred outlet is stout. As co-owner Jack Harris once told *The Daily Astorian*: “The great thing about stouts is that they’re really accepting of almost anything you want to throw into them. They’re really an excellent food-y kind of beer. There is just this incredible variety of flavor and aroma and mouth feel and texture that you can get.”

The Festival of Dark Arts is not just the culmination of Stout Month but Fort George’s year at large. In just its fifth iteration, the event has become a destination. Tickets sell out weeks in advance. I met revelers who came from great



The Scotch egg made for an ideal festival food: portable, hot and a nugget of protein.

distances. One couple traveled all the way from Alaska. They made the pilgrimage last year too.

Besides the 60-plus stouts — 16 of which were crafted at Fort George, the others from mostly Northwest breweries — the hundreds of revelers enjoyed myriad live arts, including metal smithing, tattooing, ice carving, dancing and a full slate of live music. Tipping back a glass to the soft, psychedelic pop wash of Portland’s Jackson Boone, the Mouth was in his happy place.

The dozens and dozens of stouts — more than any human short of Andre the Giant could sample in a day — were scattered about at eight pouring stations, each with different selections. Part of the fun is devising one’s own tasting expedition. To that end, the passport, with its list of beers, details and locations, is integral. (Lovely as it is, there’s room for improvement: Rather than alphabetically, beers should be organized by location.) In it I scrawled notes and highlighted batches I’d like to sample. I can only imagine the lengths to which stout fanatics took the exploration and cataloging.

My first pour came in the shining din of the Lovell building: Fort George’s own Matryoshka w/



The wood-fired pizza on the festival’s menu made for a great accompaniment to the stout on tap at Fort George Brewery’s Festival of Dark Arts.

Cocoa Nibs. I traded three tokens for a 3-ounce pour. (Tokens cost \$1 each, and beers were exchanged for one to three tokens.) Among the towering tanks, I smelled then sipped the Matryoshka. It was deep, rich, thick and syrupy sweet like molasses. Aged in bourbon barrels, there was indeed that oak-y wooden, booze-y hint. And at 12 percent alcohol by volume, it was strong — certainly denser, heavier and more complex than what we normally think of as beer. These would be baseline essences throughout the day: enveloping, burly, bottomless. (Bourbon barrel-aged stouts would also become a recurring theme.)

Next I went for another of Fort George’s: the All Seeing Pie. It finished with holiday-evoking wisps of apple pie filling and cinnamon. Around Thanksgiving or Christmas it would make a marvelous substitute for eggnog.

But, of course, there’s a stout for that too: Fort George’s Keg Nog was viscous and milky, with the requisite twinkle of cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg. With an ABV of just 5 percent, however, it wasn’t nearly as stiff as many of the competing titans. Indeed, stouts truly run the gamut.

And, as such, I was in need of a shakeup, overwhelmed by the intensely sugary stouts I’d sampled. I sought to break the trend and did so with Sunriver Brewing’s El Rey Mexican Imperial Stout. Spicy chili peppers afforded a chiseled, serrated edge. Fort George’s Itsy Bitsy Stout, a 4.2 percent Irish Dry Stout, too had a lightness and welcoming bitterness that belied a dark complexion.

Like the scattered taps, there was plenty of food too, all provided by Fort George. Though I sampled a reasonable amount, in deference to stout I’ll try to be brief. First, for a beer-centric festival, the food could’ve been more entwined with beer — I mean, heck, they were painting with stout.

Some food selections — like fish and Scotch eggs — were beer battered, and those salt bombs provided necessary ying to the sugary stout’s yang. The fish was fine, but the Scotch Egg (\$4) — like a baseball on a skewer — was absolutely ideal for the fest. Steaming hot and edible with one hand, the shell was crunchy, the sausage herby, and the egg precisely cooked. It was a much-needed nugget of protein that wouldn’t require a nap — and, hence, leave room for more stout.

The Mac and Cheese (\$8 to \$9) was the opposite, an anchor that was overpriced and had nonexistent flavor.

The pizza emerging from that same wood-fired oven (\$4 a slice), was much, much better, with a perfect crust.

Back to the stouts: The Kolososos, from The Commons brewery, had a pinch of citrus derived from orange peel, but it stuck close to the mean. The Suge Knight, from one of my preferred breweries, Boneyard, had an eye-catching, perhaps controversial name, but a smooth character that was the opposite of the eponymous rap mogul. The Kaiju too, from Fort George, hardly felt “destructive” as it was described, though the black tea it included was a welcome tweak.

But to that end, I wished for a few more far-out concoctions — something like the briny stout Fort George made a few years ago by running the beer through a few bushels of oysters. It’s wholly possible that those high-concept stouts were out there, somewhere on the campus, and I just hadn’t found them. To be fair, for as much as I was seeking, I too let the beers find me. (And some taps, like the one from the highly sought after, small-batch pFriem Family Brewers, blew early in the day.)

As the 10 p.m. closing time neared, I wondered if maybe the rich flavors were running together, blurring in my palate. Then I had Great Notion Brewing’s Double Stack. Made with coffee and “boatloads of Vermont maple syrup,” it was familiar and robust, creamy like coffee ice cream. It was at once a member of the stout family I’d grown accustomed to over the evening and yet strikingly vivid.

But just like that, my pockets swollen with more wooden tasting tokens, the Festival of Dark Arts was over — like the daylight in February, gone too soon.