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No foolin': The Maine Dish is brewed with maple syrup and live lobsters

BY JON ABERNATHY • For The Bulletin

If you're reading this article on or about April 1, and I begin by telling you it describes a beer brewed with maple syrup, balsam fir tips and live lobsters, would you believe it or think it was an April Fools' prank? It's true! In mid-January, Boss Rambler Beer Club released The Maine Dish, an imperial stout brewed with all three of those ingredients. Inspired by oyster stout (which, despite April Fools' Day, is also a thing), the brewery looked to head brewer Jacob Bansmer's home state of Maine for this unusual beer.

The description says:

"Forget oysters, we flew in Maine-sourced live lobster, balsam fir, and maple syrup for this ode to Jacob's home state. Don't worry, there's no seafood-y aspect to the beer, the lobster shell simply imparts a creamy mouthfeel to complement the subtle hints of fir and maple in this otherwise rich and smooth 'wicked good' imperial stout you just have to try!"

I reached out to Boss Rambler to find out more.

"Jacob is from Maine, and we've been working on this concept to make a beer with all Maine-sourced ingredients," said founder Matt Molletta via email. "We love lobster and figured if oysters stouts work, why not lobster (plus it added a really fun, unique aspect to the beer)."

Oyster stout is an obscure historical style originating in England, inspired by the classical pairing of stout and shellfish.

"Brewers cut out the middleman and threw the oysters straight in the kettle," says Jeff Alworth in *The Beer Bible*. "Oyster stouts have enjoyed a minor revival in the twenty-first century and, against all odds, they're actually pretty tasty. The oysters add salinity, but nothing fishy. Oyster stouts have a tinge of brine, but otherwise taste just like stout."

According to Molletta, a dozen live lobsters were overnighed from Maine. "We put the lobster in muslin bags and boiled them in the kettle for the first 10-ish minutes of the boil, then put them on ice for later," he said.

Naturally, I inquired about what they did with the cooked lobster.



Submitted photo

In January, Boss Rambler Beer Club released The Maine Dish, an imperial stout brewed with ingredients from head brewer Jacob Bansmer's home state of Maine.

"We had a hell of a lobster feast that night! We essentially had an all-you-can-eat buffet of Maine lobster rolls and cracked lobster. It was enjoyed with the Boss Rambler family."

Two "full shopping bags" of balsam fir were split between the mash (during which the sugary wort is extracted from the malt) and the conditioning tank. And about three pints of Maine maple syrup was split between the boil and the conditioning tank as well.

"We wanted the beer to be rich, but the additional flavors to be subtle so not to over-

power. I think we nailed what we were going for," said Molletta.

The question on everyone's mind of course is, what does it smell and taste like? The short answer: It's not fishy. The aroma is that of a sweet, roasty stout, with some maple and a touch of cola (a character that can come from fir and spruce). While it may simply be due to the power of suggestion, I did detect a hint of brine and a clean "ocean" quality to it, followed up by a subtle smokiness and more syrup.

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It's nicely sweet with a rich, not-quite-chocolate flavor that is nutty with a touch of roast that's reminiscent of cola. There's no overt "fish" or "sea" character, but I believe there is a contribution from the lobster in a subtle brine-like note with hints of sweet lobster meat. Overall, there is a delicate, smoky hint of maple syrup and a good sweetness without being cloying.

To be honest, if I drank this blind, I probably wouldn't have been able to tell that there was anything like lobster used in the recipe; it's a tasty sweet stout with just enough alcohol at 8% by volume to boost it to "imperial" strength. So have no fear!

I asked Molletta how customers have been reacting to the beer. In general, it's been well received, he said.

"There's been some who have dived right in, excited to try such a 'weird' beer, but there's certainly been some skepticism as well. It's taken some educating on our end, and also just accepting the fact that it's not some folks cup of tea."

The Maine Dish is currently available on draft and in cans, which can be ordered for pickup or delivery. No foolin'!