



January 9, 2008

BEERS OF THE TIMES

## A Taste for Brews That Go to Extremes

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

AS a life philosophy, it may not lead to wealth, happiness or old age, but for many American brewers today the motto printed on the bottle of Moylander Double I.P.A., from Moylan's, a West Coast brewer, is a guiding principle:

"If one is good, then two is better!"

Such is the ethos of extreme beers, an all-American genre in which brewers are engaged in a constant game of "Can you top this?" Whether using an inordinate amount of traditional ingredients like malt or hops, or adding flavorings undreamed of by Old World brewers, American brewers have created a signature style that beer enthusiasts seem both to love and hate.

In the last 30 years American brewers have produced exceptional versions of classic Old World styles, whether pale ales or Pilseners, porters or stouts. They've even resuscitated nearly extinct styles like India pale ale, now one of the more popular genres in the United States. But nothing has caught their imagination like going over the top.

Forget about I.P.A.'s, strong, hoppy brews developed by the British centuries ago to withstand the ocean voyage to colonial India. Americans are now making double I.P.A.'s, Extreme I.P.A.'s, even Unearthly I.P.A.'s.

Nowadays, the beer shelves are so crammed with brews labeled Maximus, Monstrous and Imperial that you feel as if you've stumbled into a file of e-mail spam.

In this world, bigger is always better, and why not? Hummers rule the road and 16 percent alcohol pinot noirs rule the wine ratings. Why not a beer like Stone Ruination I.P.A., so-called, the brewery proudly asserts, because of the ruinous effect of "this massive hop monster" on your palate. Are you man or woman enough for this beer?

Many beer lovers are aghast at the creative liberties American brewers are taking with traditional styles, feeling that the bigger-is-better principle is reducing American brewing to the equivalent of a frat party.

But to the brewers themselves, it is a matter of creative pride, not to mention patriotism.

"We're the same country that put men on the moon, and we're taking the same approach to beer," said Brendan Moylan, the founder of Moylan Brewing Company in Novato, Calif. "We passed the rest of the world by ages ago, and they're just waking up to it."

He's right. From Asia to Italy, brewers are trying to emulate these beers. Not content with the Moylander

Double I.P.A., Mr. Moylan now makes what he calls a triple I.P.A., Hopsickle Imperial, which he said was “the hoppiest beer on earth.”

To judge for ourselves whether these transgressive beers were simply stretching boundaries in creative ways or were the doomed siblings of cars with tail fins, the tasting panel sampled 25 examples, all from American brewers. Florence Fabricant and I were joined for the tasting by Garrett Oliver, brewmaster of the Brooklyn Brewery, and Phil Markowski, the brewmaster at the Southampton Publick House, a restaurant and brewery in Southampton, N.Y.

Each of us, I think it is fair to say, came to the tasting with a dose of skepticism. The philosophy of more is better, we agreed, is generally ridiculous. Nonetheless, for many people in the beer world, the question of extreme beers is a touchy subject.

“The hoppiest beer?” Garrett asked. “It’s a fairly idiotic pursuit, like a chef saying, ‘This is the saltiest dish.’ Anyone can toss hops in a pot, but can you make it beautiful?”

Phil likened the appeal of these beers to the macho allure of hot sauces, which almost dare enthusiasts to try the hottest ones.

Meanwhile, Garrett finds it offensive that brewers use terms like double I.P.A. “It’s claptrap intended to cloud the illustrious history of the style,” he said. “It’s like calling a wine double Beaujolais — it’s an insult.”

Gee, we hadn’t even gotten to the beers yet.

Actually, I’m less bothered than Garrett by double I.P.A.’s. Europe already has a tradition of augmentative beer terminology, like bock and doppelbock in Germany, and Belgian Trappist ales, which may be double and triple.

Of course, those styles are well understood. Here in the United States, double, imperial and the rest can mean whatever the brewer wants them to mean. Certainly, too, the Old World has its tradition of huge beers.

Imperial porters and stouts, barley wines and Trappist ales can easily contain more than 10 percent alcohol, roughly twice the ordinary amount.

We did not include American versions of these genres in our tasting, on the theory that they were not new stylistically. Nor did we include beers that used unusual ingredients or flavorings, like maple syrup, kumquats or whatever. Instead, we focused on beers that took existing styles and exaggerated them. For the most part, this means beers that are hoppy in the extreme.

Brewers have always used the resinous cone of the hop plant to add bitterness and aromas to beer. Hops and alcohol also act as a preservative, and you could make the case that India pale ale, with its higher-than-normal alcohol and hops content, was an extreme beer of the 18th century. So it makes sense that most of the extreme beers today are characterized by their ultrahopiness. Of the 25 beers we tasted, at least 20 of them would fall into the category of exaggerated I.P.A.’s regardless of what they call themselves.

To carry their extraordinary bitterness and aromatic zest, these beers need a sturdy foundation, so they tend

to have outsize malty qualities as well as high alcohol. They are not therefore session beers, brews that you can drink in multiple pints over the course of an evening. Still, the best versions, in which all the elements are well balanced, are highly appealing. Florence, in particular, was surprised at how many she found likable, and even elegant.

Our favorite was the robust 90 Minute Imperial I.P.A. from Dogfish Head, a beer that balances its exaggerated caramel and chocolate sweetness with a bracing bitterness derived from hops. If you sneer at the 90 Minute, Dogfish also occasionally issues its 120 Minute I.P.A., which, at 20 percent alcohol, may well be, as the brewery contends, "the biggest I.P.A. ever brewed."

Our No. 2 beer, the Weyerbacher Double Simcoe I.P.A., seemed to embody the term "killer," the extreme beer fan's favorite compliment. Killer hops, killer fruit, overwhelming yet bearable, even enjoyable, because it is so well balanced.

The No. 3 beer, the I.P.A. Maximus from Lagunitas, was something of a lightweight in this crowd with a mere 7.5 percent alcohol, yet it was lively and energetic with a lush citrus perfume.

By contrast, the Gordon from Oskar Blues — the only beer in our tasting to come in a can — was practically mellow and subdued. Was that a good thing? We thought so, because the flavors were nonetheless distinct and complex.

You would not call the Victory Hop Wallop mellow, but it was fresh and delicious. And you would never call Mad River's Steelhead Double I.P.A. or Flying Dog's Double Dog Double Pale Ale subdued. Their signature hop aromas practically punch you in the face.

Our tasting included just a small sampling of the wide variety of extreme beers out there. Frankly, while most American craft brewers do make a version of an extreme beer, they also produce traditional styles as well.

"The extreme beers definitely get more attention," Mr. Moylan of Moylan Brewery conceded, "but here in the brew pub, most people are drinking the mellower stuff."

Perhaps that's a good thing, because the brewing world is now facing an international hops shortage. No, it's not because of the daunting amount of hops used in many extreme beers. It's more a result of the normal cycle of supply and demand.

Overproduction of hops in the early 1990s resulted in excess supply and depressed prices, said Ralph Olson, a hops dealer based in Yakima, Wash. As a result, world hop acreage has fallen from about 234,000 in 1994 to 113,000 in 2006. It may take several years, Mr. Olson suggested, for hops production to be able to meet current demands.

Meanwhile, expect beer prices to go up. But there's nothing wrong with that. If \$10 a six-pack is good, \$12 is better, right?

Tasting Report: Careful, These Are Beers That Can Bite

**Dogfish Head**

\$3.50, 12 oz.

\*\* 1/2

**90 Minute Imperial I.P.A., Milton, Del., 9 percent alcohol**

Big and robust with chocolate, caramel and balsam flavors and a  
bracingly bitter aftertaste.

**Weyerbacher Double Simcoe I.P.A.**

\$3, 12 oz.

\*\* 1/2

**Easton, Pa., 9 percent alcohol**

Big and almost overwhelmingly intense yet balanced, with aromas and flavors of sweet fruit and piney hops.

**Lagunitas I.P.A. Maximus**

\$5, 22 oz.

\*\* 1/2

**Petaluma, Calif., 7.5 percent alcohol**

Lively and energetic with hoppy pine and grapefruit aromas balanced by sweet, grainy malt.

**Oskar Blues Gordon**

\$4.25, 12 oz.

\*\* 1/2 Lyons, Colo., 8.7 percent alcohol

Hoppy aromas of pine resin, yet mellow and balanced with lingering flavors of licorice and tamarind.

**Victory Hop Wallop**

\$2.50, 12 oz.

\*\* 1/2

**Downingtown, Pa., 8.5 percent alcohol**

Extremely bitter hop flavors, yet balanced with floral and ginger

aromas.

**Mad River Brewing Steelhead**

\$1.75, 12 oz.

\*\* 1/2

Double I.P.A., Blue Lake, Calif., 8.6 percent alcohol

Aromas of caramel and butterscotch with briny flavors and plenty of hoppy bitterness.

**Flying Dog**

\$3, 12 oz.

\*\*

Double Dog Double Pale Ale, Frederick, Md.

10.5 percent alcohol

Like a fruitcake with hops; fruity with caramel and vanilla flavors and lots of bitter citrus.

**Moylan's Moylander Double I.P.A.**

\$5.25, 22 oz.

\*\*

Novato, Calif., 8.5 percent alcohol

Hoppy aromas of grapefruit, flowers and pine; full-bodied and slightly sweet yet balanced.

**Southern Tier Unearthly**

\$7, 22 oz.

\*\*

Imperial I.P.A., Lakewood, N.Y., 11 percent alcohol

Silky and very sweet with a Grand Marnier-like orange flavor.

**Great Divide Hercules Double I.P.A.**

\$8, 22 oz.

\*\*

Denver, Colo., 9.1 percent alcohol

Powerful, spicy grapefruit flavors and a lingering alcohol burn.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---

-