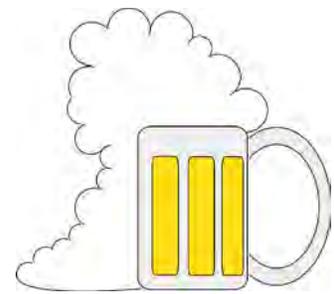


October 16, 2016

Romancing the Foam No. 100



I trace my affection for all things Quebec back to sometime in the mid-70's. My roommate Brent and I, having been unceremoniously dumped by our significant others, were wallowing in the depths of despair. As young men in such condition are wont to do, we grabbed a fifth of Canadian Club or two and headed for the subway to find a suitable spot to wash away our sorrows. We got on the Bloor-Danforth line at High Park and headed east. At Dundas West a band of Quebequois boarded our car, one



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thing lead to another and by Christie we had the whole car singing Alouette. With some mutual beverage sharing we left a couple of emissaries in the original car to maintain the caliber of song and proceeded up the train car by car until by about Pape we had the whole train singing. We had similar success on our return trip and Brent, our new found Quebequois friends and I departed the train. Depleted of beverages – with the train still singing Alouette – we made out way to the Brunswick House, where we got Lil, the MC to stop singing “I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coco Nuts” and “Yes We Have no Bananas” long enough to lead the house in Alouette. So, in the mid-90s, when I first saw Unibroue with made in Quebec emblazoned on the bottle sitting on a shelf at South Lyndale Liquors, I remembered the guys on the train from Quebec and stuffed a couple of bottles into my cart. This issue is for them and the joy we shared one early winter evening on a subway in Toronto.

Unibroue traces its roots to Serge Racine and Quebequois hardware magnate André Dion. In 1990 the pair determined to get into the burgeoning craft beer scene and they wanted to specialize in bottle conditioned Belgian Ales. Step 1: in 1990 they bought a chunk of a brewery. One of Canada’s original craft breweries, founded in 1982 fell upon hard times by the end of the 1980s. André and Serge bought 75%. Step 2: in 1991 they bought the rest of the brewery. Step 3: get a famous partner – in 1992 André and Serge sold a small piece of the brewery to Quebec singer Robert Charlebois. Step 4: get help – they consulted with Belgian Brewer Riva to get off the ground and produce their initial beer Blanche de Chambly. By 1994 Unibroue began trickling into the US and major investments in 1995 and 1996 funded expansions that increased the flow. During the last half of the 90’s their beer became a cheaper alternative to Belgian imports while maintaining decent quality. Their quality increased in 1999 when they hired Paul Arnott, who by then had a decade of experience under his belt as the Master Brewer at Chimay, one of the world’s finest producers of Trappist Ales.

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In 2004, Sleeman bought Unibroue for \$36.5 million. Sleeman dates from 1836 when John Sleeman founded a brewery in St. Catherines, Ontario. The story takes a hiatus in 1933 when the Ontario government yanked Sleeman's brewing license for bootlegging (smuggling beer to Detroit). The founder's great great grandson re-established the company in 1988. All of French Canada gagged at the thought of their premier brewery falling into the hands of an Ontario brewery. That ended in 2006 when the Japanese giant Sapporo bought Sleeman for \$400 million.

So why do I like this brewery? Unibroue does not follow the typical craft beer trajectory but they have managed to do many of the right things. It is more of a George Steinbrenner approach. From the mid-90's well into the 2000s, they were some of the best Belgian style bottle conditioned ales you could find. For the same quality beer they cost around 30% less per bottle and they avoided a lot of the abuse involved in shipping a beer from Belgium to the US. Here are some of my favorites.



I am drinking a bottle of Unibroue Don de Dieu (9% alcohol by volume, 10.5 International Bittering Units) with my take on a Mediterranean burrito. It's a pita wrapped around kefta, tabouli and cucumber yogurt salad. Don de Dieu means Gift of God. It was the name of Samuel de Champlain's ship that he sailed to the new world to claim it on behalf of the King of France. Unibroue introduced Don de Dieu in 1998. It is a triple wheat ale on lees, brewed with spices. Lees are deposits of dead yeast in the bottom of the bottle. There are there because the beer gets its carbonation from a second fermentation in the bottle rather than from carbon dioxide added at bottling. This produces a carbonation with very fine soft bubbles, giving the beer a rich creamy feel. I am drinking my current bottle nearly 2 years before its best by date. It pours hazy gold with a very finely bubbled persistent 3" off-white to cream colored foam collar that leaves splotches of lace on the glass. Tiny bubbles slowly rise to the surface of the glass. It has a cakey aroma laced with banana,

spice, perfume, citrus, and traces of vanilla. Fruit, nectarine and biscuit roll over the tongue with some spicy herbal dryness on the finish. It has a very creamy texture with a medium body and above average carbonation. This yeast driven beer features big fruit flavors with a light biscuit background and a spicy accent. The fruit and spice in the beer do amazing things with the spices in the kefta and it interacts on another level with the tomato, mint and spices in the tabouli. I am enjoying how the beer and the food complement and add to each other. You can buy Don de Dieu at South Lyndale Liquors for \$7.99 for a 750 ml (25.4 ounces) bottle. It should run about the same where you are. It gets 95 from Ratebeer.com, 94 from the Alström Brothers at Beeradvocate.com and 92 from the members. I rate it 95.



Unibroue added La Fin Du Monde to its portfolio in February 1994, about the same time they started exporting to the US. It means “the end of the world” and when I first picked up a bottle 20 or more years ago I thought of apocalyptic explosions and what not but actually, the early French explorers considered North America the end of the world and a pretty scary one at that. When I figured out the actual meaning, La Fin Du Monde became even more enticing as I often seek out end of the world kind of places when travelling. This beer is a perfect companion. It is a Belgian Triple-style golden ale that weighs in at 9.0% alcohol by volume and has 19 International Bittering Units. Unibroue spent 18 months developing the yeast strain for this beer. This bottle is good for a year and a half past when I am drinking it. La Fin Du Monde pours hazy straw gold under a 2” rocky white foam column that dissipates to a thick film that grips the side of the glass. It has yeasty aromas of over-ripe fruit, orange peel, coriander, honey and spice supported by rich malt. On the palate it starts yeasty and mildly sweet with big fruit flavors feature banana, orange, and tropical fruit seasoned with

flowery spice. It dries on the finish. The texture is big and creamy with above average carbonation, medium body and a little bite from the carbonation. It feels good in the mouth. This big yeast driven beer full of Belgian flavor is available in 12 ounce and 750 ml bottles and on draught. I prefer it in the 750 ml bottles. They can withstand the levels of carbonation much better than the smaller bottles and on draught the carbonation never seems right. This gets 98 from Ratebeer.com, 100 from the Alström Brothers at Beeradvocate.com and 93 from the members. I rate it 98. 44 France is selling La Fin Du Monde for \$6.99 a 750 ml bottle.

Unibroue added Maudite to its line up in 1992. It was the first strong beer sold in Quebec and it took some lobbying by the brewer to get it on store shelves. Unibroue calls it an Amber-Red Ale on Lees. It is an 8.0% alcohol by volume Belgian Strong Dark Ale brewed with spices. The named means “the damned” and it refers to a legend of early New French lumberjacks stranded in the wood one winter who conjured up the devil and sold their souls to return home. The devil flew their canoe across the night sky until one of the Lumberjacks invoked the name of God, which sent the canoe crashing down to earth. I have had three recent bottles ranging



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from 2 years before the best by date to 2 months. Despite the brewery's optimism about the longevity of their beers, fresher is better. The younger bottles have a more refined subtlety not found in their older brethren. A bright reddish amber pour produces a 3" finely bubbled cream foam cap that kicks up splotchy lace. It exudes fragrances of over ripe fruit, malty fruit cake, light fruit, orange peel and coriander. Big malt and big Belgian yeasts join to develop fruit cake, over ripe fruit, banana, caramel, dark sugars, orange, spice and anise flavors. Maudite is highly carbonated, medium to medium light body and very creamy. This is one of the better Belgian Strong Dark Ales available. The Alström Brothers at Beeradvocate.com give Maudite 100, the Beeradvocate members give it 93, and Ratebeer.com and I give it 98. Total Wine and South Lyndale Liquor are selling 750 ml bottles of Maudite for \$6.99.



Unibroue Trois Pistoles Dark Ale on Lees is another Belgian Strong Dark Ale (9% alcohol by volume, 15.5 International bittering Units) and this one is a mere 4 days from its best by date. It is darker and heavier than the others so it can handle age getter. Trois Pistoles means three coins and it refers to a small Quebec village. Over 300 years ago the local bishop needed to build a church so he conjured up a good devil to help haul large stones to build the church. The devil appeared in the form of a large bridled black horse. The horse disappeared after someone removed the bridle leaving one stone left to finish the church. The stone is still missing. Maudite pours brilliant dark chestnut under a 2" light tan foam collar with a very fine bead that takes over three minutes to recede to a thick film. It has a big malt nose with some dark sugars, ripe to over ripe fruit, a hint of chocolate and alcohol. An initial sweetness crosses the tongue with dark malts and sugars, traces of banana and fruit cake, ripe fruit, plum, raisin and citrus. It shifts to dry, spicy grain flavors especially on the finish punctuated by a dose of tartness. Very creamy Belgian bottle conditioned carbonation gives the beer a very soft

texture. Maudite is a big beer but surprisingly light on its feet – not heavy or cloying. It is a well composed and well balanced yeast driven Belgian style dark ale with big flavors. South Lyndale Liquors is selling Trois Pistoles for \$7.99 per 750 ml bottle. It gets 99 from Ratebeer.com, 100 from Beeradvocate.com's Alström brothers, 94 from the members and 98 from me.

We like to envision craft beer as the product of some poor soul slaving away for the love of craft producing world class beer. Unibroue started out as a hardware guy and his buddy who wanted to get into the craft beer scene. They bought all the right stuff and talent and made good beer. I wanted to hate them when Unibroue sold out to Sleeman and my anger lasted about 2 weeks. I wanted to hate them even more when Sleeman sold out to Sapporo. That lasted three weeks. What can I say? It's good, world class beer at a decent price. Plus it reminds me of the guys on the subway from Quebec.