

March 2, 2019

Romancing the Foam No. 123



It is 1969 and I am working with migrant farmworkers. I am in a camp in Arenac County Michigan east of Standish - Lutz Camp Number 2. It has an old house with three generations of one family and three one room cabins filled with one family each – probably around 60 people all together. They are served by 2 over-full outhouses – one with 4 seats and a cold-water shower covered in places by tar paper that I could not stand up in. They are working sugar beets. I stop by here at least once a week to see how people are doing. I notice a little girl, around 4 or 5 who has a tooth sticking straight out of her mouth and it is affecting her speech and probably does not look good and it is cutting into her lip. I ask her mom if I can figure out something to do

about this, would you go along with it. She said yes. I get home, I get a phone book and I start calling dentists in Midland until I find one that says he will help. So Mrs. Castro and I with the small girl travel to the dentist. It is an hour and a half drive each way. It is going to take a few visits to fix the little girl's teeth. Mom is worried – if she takes that much time off field work, her whole family might be fired and without a home. Can I take the little girl to the next appointments? The little girl doesn't speak English and my Spanish sucks. Mrs. Castro – can you loan me someone who speaks some English who you do not need to work in the fields. She has another young daughter about a year older than the first I can borrow who is too young to hoe sugar beets. I'm scared shitless. I have three bothers – I am 19, I do not know shit about little girls and now I am taking them to a dentist and the victim does not speak English. The dentist asks if he can check out the older girl too and she also has stuff that needs to be done. On the drive down I have explained to the girls that it will hurt at first, but the end result will be good. This is not a concept that 4 or 5-year old girls readily accept.



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The littlest girl does not know what is going on and is terrified but for some reason the older sister likes me and trusts me. She agrees to go first. I know she is scared but she is strong for her sister. The dentist lets me and her sister into the room. I hold her hand and her little sister holds the other hand. Her hand is the size of a walnut in my hand and I can see the fear in her big brown eyes. She seizes on my hand with an iron grip. I put my other hand on her head and say soothing shit she probably cannot understand. She does not cry or make a sound.

When we finish with the older sister, she says a bunch of stuff in Spanish to her little sister I do not understand but the little girl stoically takes her place in the dental chair. She has a look of sheer terror. Her sister and I each hold a hand and I have a hand on her head. Her sister talks to her continuously in Spanish – which I can barely follow but the little girl hangs in there through the Novocain shot and the extraction.

On the return, I discover a dairy queen in Standish which is about far enough along on our drive home for most of the Novocain to have worn off and I get them whatever they want (I'm a sucker that way). We have three more visits to the dentist hitting up the dairy queen each time and the little girls are running out to my car as soon as they see me driving up to the camp.

After my success with the little girls, the people in the camp treat me like family and I get into a conversation with Guadalupe (Lupe), the little girls' oldest sister. She has just graduated high school and she wants to get into a secretarial program at a business School in McAllen, Texas. I ask if I could see her report card. She has straight A's – 4 years of straight A's. I ask if I can borrow her report card. I take it back to school and show it to Dr. Chuck Westie, an old school sociology professor who hates my political beliefs but who gives me jobs and helps me out and likes me for some odd reason. I say what the hell is this straight A student doing hoeing sugar beets and trying to get into secretary program? Dr. Chuck says can I make a copy of her grades? Hell yes. He grabs Howard Stressman – the head of financial aid and goes to talk to the university President, Bill Boyd with Lupe's report card that evening. The next day, they say we will give the kid a full ride – can you find more kids like this? Hell yes. We probably pump 20 to 30 kids a year into the program over the next few years. I leave the agency after two more years and return 9 years later after bouts of construction work and too much college. Guadalupe Castro – the girl I got the scholarship for – is my boss.

This story always gives me the warm and fuzzies and warm and fuzzies are a perfect antidote for coming off a month of record low temperatures followed by a month of record snow and low temperatures that threaten to seep way too deep into March.

Basque cider also gives me the warm and fuzzies. It reminds me of my friend Bernardino Fernandez, a Basque Priest and rabble-rouser extraordinaire filled with a spirit, warmth and enthusiasm that could cut the chill of any day. I had my first taste of Basque Cider when I picked up a Basque shepherd hitch hiking to Nevada to ply his trade. I gave him a ride from just north of Toledo deep into Michigan's upper peninsula. We sat on a Lake Michigan beach, drank a bottle of his cider, several bottles of beer, ate cheese and watched the sunset and then crashed on the beach. Frequently the first taste of a beverage colors the subsequent tastes of that beverage and the sunset on Lake Michigan, the Basque Shepard and



Bernardino always come to mind when I open a bottle of Basque cider. Gurutzeta Sagardotegia Sagardoa Basque Cider (6.0% alcohol by volume) is a natural cider made with pressed apples and nothing else. The cider follows traditions that go back 800 years, using a blend of acidic apples fermented with yeast from the apple skins and bottled unfiltered. It has a rich crisp, tart apple aroma with some apple skin, a trace of funk and other fruit aromas. Traditionally, you use the long pour, holding the bottle 3 or more feet above the glass - the farther away the better, which aerates the cider and gives it a bit of fizz and then you drink within a few minutes (or in one quick gulp) before the cider goes flat and loses its character. I typically manage a foot or two on the pour - one foot inside and two feet outside - and the glass fills hazy gold with a light dose of bubbles and an initial fizzy white cap that dissipates quickly. This is tart, petillant, mildly funky and dry as a bone. The tartness approaches

the level of tartness of a fresh lemon. There are some mineral flavors in the background. The funk is a ripe to over ripe apple funk with some yeast character worked in. It leaves a tart apple, light funk mildly astringent bone-dry aftertaste. This is unique, flavorful, funky, rustic, romantic and incredibly refreshing. Often when I drink this I hear the waves of Lake Michigan, feel the warm sun and think of my Basque friends. Try it with Idiazabel or Ossau-Iraty cheese, a thick wood fire grilled steak, salt cod, fish tacos, tapas, oysters or even fish and chips. This cider will make you want to dance. I rate this 90.

Clown Shoes Trillionaire (12.5% alcohol by volume) has a lot going for it as a winter doldrums antidote. Clowns and clown shoes combine creepy and funny and trillionaire brings with it a little bombast that also evokes a chuckle. The beer itself is a perfect brew for a dreary March 2 that looks and feels more like January or February 2. Trillionaire is a big English Barleywine aged in Scotch whisky barrels. It pours hazy dark amber to light brown as continual streams of bubbles rise rapidly from the bottom of the glass to refresh the light tan head that rapidly dissipates. Trillionaire releases dark sugar, dark dried fruit, whisky, and slight tart aromas. It has an almost juicy scent with traces of over ripe fruit. Trillionaire is very creamy on the palate with caramel, vanilla and alcohol that initially evoke memories of a sweet, yeasty caramel roll.



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Mid-palate a mild sweetness persists as sherry-soaked fruit emerge and grow as the beer warms. A second pour produces a 1.5" rocky and persistent head. Trillionaire is mildly sweet but the alcohol and a mild hop bitterness provide balance. It is alcoholic and warming but not excessively hot or solventy. The carbonation is medium high, and the body is very creamy, full and chewy. This beer is the perfect companion to fill the gap between dinner and bedtime or the gap between November and April and goes well with a small fire or a cigar. I rate Trillionaire 85.



Stick your nose into a glass of glass of Prairie Rose Meadery Basswood Traditional Mead (12.0% alcohol by volume) and you will know why I have included it here. The scent carries you to late to June to July (as early as April farther south) when the Basswoods bloom. The basswood tree is a variety of the linden tree and is called the lime tree in parts of Europe. Basswood trees grow as far west as the eastern border of the Dakotas and from the Arkansas border north to Canada and from the northern Minnesota border east to northern Maine. The trees grow from 75 to 130 feet and in the northern reaches of their range from late June to mid-July they flower and fill the forest with a sweet, powerful scent of honey, jasmine and citrus peel. The bees ably pack some of this smell into the honey giving Basswood honey a floral scent with hints of mint and flowers on the tongue. Prairie Rose Meadery Basswood Traditional Mead (12.0% alcohol by volume) is a traditional mead made with Basswood honey. It is standard strength and still. The mead captures enough of the honey to evoke the late June forest's floral basswood aroma with a minty, earthy smell underneath and a hint of citrus rind. There

is also a good dose of honey supported by smooth alcohol in the aroma. The mead is beautiful to look at, shimmering brilliant gold with good reflectance and a well-developed meniscus. A swirl of the glass produces clear, well developed legs. The mead is semi-sweet. A subtle floral, earthy, minty basswood character hinting of citrus with a dash of pepper seasons the mild honey flavors. The honey character is moderate, and the basswood is noticeable. The alcohol is smooth, producing a mild warming. It is not hot or harsh. There is a light, balancing tartness and just a dab of drying astringency on the finish. I must buy another bottle of this soon. I rate it 94.

So, while waiting for frost giants to loosen their iron grip, grab a bottle of Basque cider, Scotch Whisky barrel aged barley wine or basswood mead and latch onto some warm memories. This will all be over soon enough.