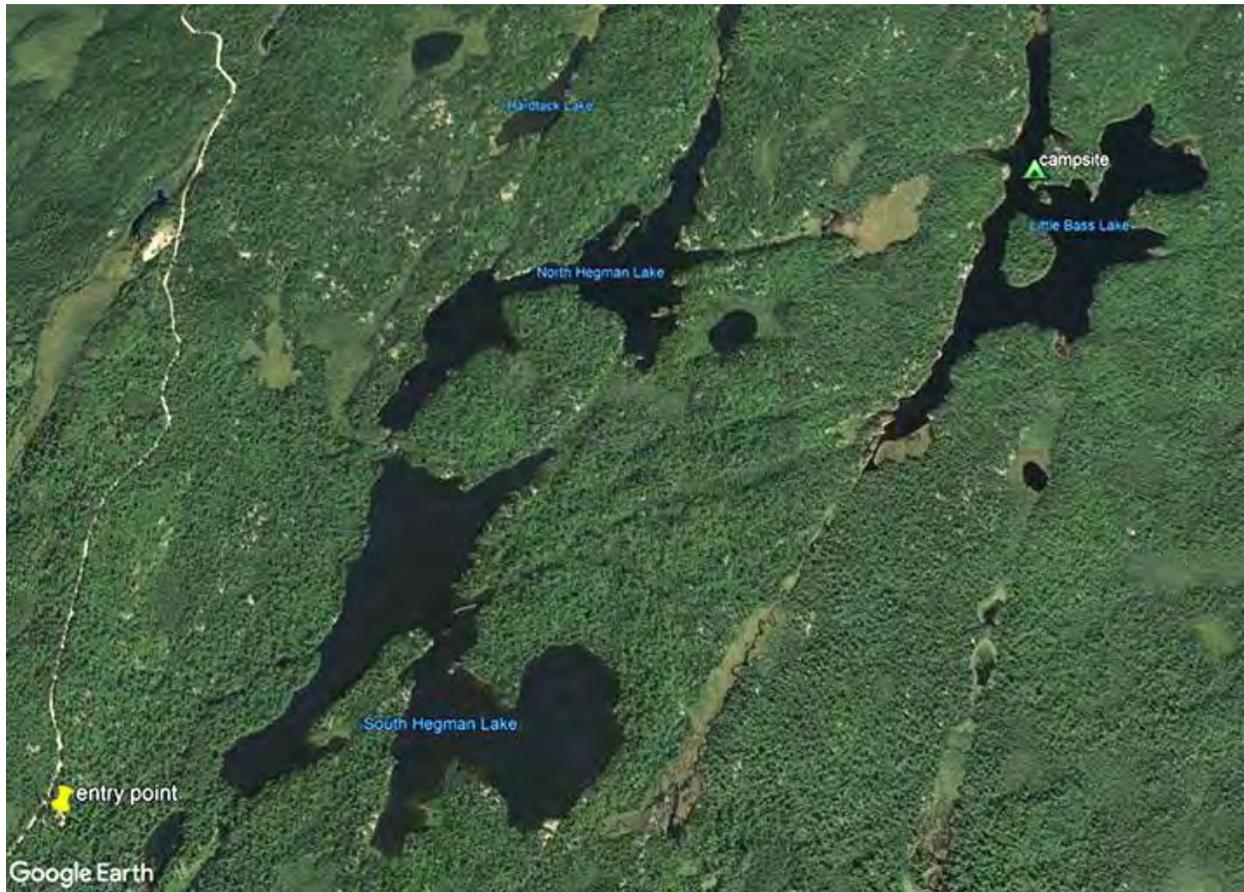


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# Romancing the Foam No. 124

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When someone finds out that you judge or write about beer they immediately ask: “what was the best beer you ever had” or “what is your favorite beer.” My answer involves my friend Rob Young, probably the best interior painter I ever met and a pretty good drummer. He is the only person I know who can take a piece of plywood and make it look like marble. It is some time mid-summer in the mid-80’s and Rob and I both want to get as far away from things as possible in as short of time as possible. We decide on Little Bass Lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. We reason that two nasty portages and nowhere to go after you get there are enough to thwart church groups singing Kumbaya or drunken idiots harassing the wildlife. I had made two giant Duluth packs that Rob dubbed Big Bertha and Little Bertha large enough for everything we needed. Full they require men the size and strength of Rob and I to haul. From the entry point I carry Little Bertha and the canoe and Rob carries Big Bertha  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile to South Hegman Lake. A short paddle later we take turns with the two Berthas and the canoe over a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile portage to Little Bass Lake and find a campsite on a point with an island about 30 yards away. I take the campsite and Rob canoes over to the island and sets up his own camp.

Things go well for a couple of days and then the weather turns dark and ugly. Rob feels an electrical tingle, takes down his camp, loads up the canoe and joins me at my camp. We tie and stake down

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everything we can as the sky turns black and angrily rumbles while the wind grows and begins stripping branches off trees and the rain comes down sideways. Thunder echoes across the forest. The tent stays in one place as much due to our weight and the weight of our gear as to our tent staking skills. The storm keeps up all night and we do our best to sleep. The next day the air is hot and sticky. Lightning had struck Rob's campsite and there were trees down on the island he had camped on. My peninsula fared better but not much. Having absorbed as much solitude as one outing could provide, we pack up and return. Fallen trees and debris on the long portage require climbing trees with a canoe and tossing the Berthas over or under fallen trees. The short portage is as bad but shorter. When we get back to the entry point a tree had flattened a car parked next to Rob's van. We are tired, thirsty, sweaty and hot. There is no water at the entry point. We throw the Berthas into the van, tie the canoe to the roof, jump into the van, set our sights on Ely's Dee's Bar & Lounge, Rob turns the key – nothing. Not even a click. The battery is dead. Oh! I have a big metal cooler filled with ice and homebrew in the back. We drag the cooler under a tree by the side of the road, sit on the cooler, drink ice cold beer for a couple of hours until a car comes by and gives us a jump. That was the best beer I ever had.



Mazatlán's Shrimp Bucket provides another scene for the best beer in the world. It is in the older part of Mazatlán away from the throngs of tourists. There is a large Marlin on the wall claiming to have been caught by Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac passed through, John Wayne kept his boat nearby, and according to the bartender at the time Robert Mitchum, used to come in and nurse his hangovers with a shot of tequila and some huevos rancheros. In the mid-70's I spent some time staying in a campground up on La Playa del Oro lined with rows of hotels packed with tourists from del Norte who rarely ventured past their hotel grounds. I would bus down to the old zone to be with normal Mexicans and a splattering of the more adventuresome tourists. I would make my way to the Shrimp bucket and either sit at the bar and look at Hemingway's fish and talk with the bartender or sit under the awning, watch the bay, read Charles Bukowski and eat Camarones al Mojo de Ajo or Huachinango a la Veracruzana or

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some other mariscos unless it was breakfast and then I followed Robert Mitchum's lead and had heuvos rancheros - skipping the shot. Whatever I had, I would drink Tres Equis – a darker more characterful and malty sibling of Dos Equis and either in the bar or under the awning, feeling the cool breezes off the Sea of Cortez, it ranked among the best beers I ever drank. Nancy and I spent some time at the Shrimp Bucket on our honeymoon in the early 80's, looked at Hemingway's fish, had Camarones al Mojo de Ajo under the awning and spent the last night of our honeymoon there. I also had my last Tres Equis there with Nancy. Sometime later the marketing geniuses at Cuauhtémoc Brewery decided to dump their best beer and focus on their more insipid offerings.



Its August 1999. I'm in Amsterdam for a couple of weeks for a class on creative cities at the University of Amsterdam-Maastricht. For the third best beer I ever had I'm in the Café Golem in on Raamsteeg – an alley too narrow for cars - between Spuistraat and the Singel Canal. I have been here on and off since 1971 or 2 – at least a couple of times with Nancy. The Golem is beer drinker heaven. It is a brown bar with beams and woodwork stained brown from 2 or 3 centuries of cigarette and cigar smoke and chalk boards on the walls with names of beers handwritten on them – lots of names of beer - and it's a little out of the way for tourists so I am sitting with mostly Dutch. The front seats around a dozen at the bar and on stools along the window and there is a mezzanine in the back with two or three tables that may seat another dozen. There is a small stairway behind the bar about as wide as a case of beer that the bartender uses to go to the basement and fetch beer. I have just arrived in Amsterdam, stashed my gear in my apartment on Java Eiland and biked along the Herengracht down to the Golem. I sit at the bar

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where I usually sit. I have decided that today I will only speak Dutch and I try to order a beer and the bartender looks at me like I am speaking Swahili. After a few tries I ask the Dutch couple next to me if my Dutch sucks. They say, no your Dutch is fine. The bartender doesn't know beer, so he is pretending to not understand you. Ask for Rudi. Rudi knows beer and he steers me to Rauchenfels Steinbier. It is a medieval style of beer resurrected by Gerd Borges in 1982 in Bavaria. Until the last century or so, metal was spendy so in parts of Germany, Central Europe and Scandinavia people would brew beer in big wooden vats and heat the beer up by getting stones red hot in a fire and then toss them into the vat of beer. Rudi thought Gerd was heating his rocks with birch. Rudi has a Steinlager and a Steinweizen. They are both on tap and fresh. When you throw sooty red-hot rocks into a vat of beer, some of the sugars in the beer caramelize on the rocks and you also get some smoky soot flavors. When you are drinking these beers on tap it is like fresh baked bread warm from the oven. All the flavors and smells pop right out. Rudi starts me on the Steinlager and right off there is a continuum of dark sugar flavors from a lightly toasted pilsner malt to nearly burnt and everything in between and you can taste most of the flavors on the continuum. Then there is the smokiness – it is different from Rauchbier but it is there at about two thirds the intensity of a fresh Schlenkerla and it has a little different character. The Steinweizen has some wheat character and a darker sugar character approaching a dunkel. I spend the afternoon alternating between the Steinlager and the Steinweizen talking beer in my lousy Dutch with my new Dutch friends. I found some Rauchenfels Steinbier a couple of years after I came home in a local liquor store and it sucked. The time it took to ship the beer from Bavaria to the Twin Cities killed all the character and nuance in the beer. The magic was gone. The beer at the Golem was a vibrant fresh cut rose. The beer in Minneapolis was a 4-week-old wilted characterless cut rose with the petals turning black and falling off. They are not the same.

I could continue but as I think about the best beer I have ever had it has a lot to do with the people I am with and the places I am at as it does with the quality of the beer and when you combine quality beer with quality people and experiences it becomes incredibly nice. So what is the best beer in the world? It depends on where you are sitting, who you are with and what you are drinking. When all three converge, it is the best beer in the world.