



Romancing the Foam No. 90



New Hampshire native Bill Herlica started home brewing in the mid-90's and immediately gravitated to Belgian beers and the flavors possible to develop with Belgian yeast. Big bold beers like Russian Imperial Stouts, barley wines, old ales and braggots grabbed his attention next and these drove him to perfect his barrel aging skills. Barrels led to wild ales. By 2009 Bill learned enough to go pro, co-founding White Birch Brewing Company with his wife Ellen in Hooksett New Hampshire, 9 miles by freeway north of Manchester in a building that looks like it might have once housed a tile store or some kind of wood working shop and showroom. Thoreau and his brother John camped in Hooksett in 1839 on their journey down the Merrimack and Concord Rivers that led to the book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Thoreau uses the canoe trip as a backbone for digressions into his spirituality, intellectual development, poetry, philosophy and economic and social changes occurring during his lifetime. This strikes a chord with Herlica's brewery where craft beer forms a backbone for his excursions into his love for Belgian ales, bold burly beers, barrel aging and wild ales developed during his home brewing career.

I have been buying White Birch beers since they showed up in Minnesota a few years ago and they strike me as a tremendous value. This month I put my hunch to the test and compare the price of White Birch beers with their rating on Beeradvocate.com and the prices and ratings for similar styles of beer by checking out Total Wine. The prices for Bill's big beers – imperial stouts and barley wines compare with the prices of similar beers with the same ratings. When he starts putting ales in barrels and using wild yeasts, however, he concocts some brews with good value. In this issue I explore a few of these.

Herlica's professional beer portfolio follows his home brewing passions and results in some interesting beer. Big bold and exciting, every bottle exudes quality, passion and creativity.



Most historians agree that Central European wheat ales originated in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) sometime during the high Middle Ages. By the 17th century a sour, tart, fruity, highly effervescent wheat beer emerged in Berlin and quickly grew in popularity. By the 19th century Germany boasted more than 700 Berliner Weisse breweries with at least 50 in Berlin itself. Today, one brewery in Berlin – Schultheiss Brewery – makes Berliner Weisse. While medieval Berliner Weisses varied widely in strength, modern versions – probably driven by German tax laws - have low alcohol (around 3% abv). The result is a tart, lemony beer you can drink all day. White Birch Berliner Weisse contains a bit more alcohol (5.5% abv) than the German norm – most American versions do – but it is still a very refreshing beer. The cap releases with a hiss and fizzes as a very energetic brilliant gold pour creates a billowing 2” white foam cap that quickly dissipates. Acidic white bread, light

spice, lemon and light fruit aromas rise from the glass with a hint of wet undyed leather. Citrus and fruit tartness attack the tongue joined by a light funk and a lingering tart lemony finish. It is light, highly carbonated, crisp and very dry with an interesting rustic quality. White Birch also makes Berliner Weisses with blueberries, watermelon and raspberries.

They all rate in the low to mid 80s and cost \$6.99 for a 22 oz. bottle. New Holland’s Incorrigible is a buck a bottle cheaper but the rest of the Berliner Weisses at Total Wine ran from \$10.99 to \$14.99 with Beeradvocate.com ratings from the mid-80s to low 90s. If you are interested in the style, start with White Birch.

Grodziskie conjures up something one might drink while attempting to read Chernyshevsky huddled up in a wet wool overcoat next to a cast iron wood stove. The beer popped up in the Polish town of Grodzisk sometime in the late Middle Ages. It is a highly carbonated low alcohol wheat beer made with oak smoked malt, high mineral water, and a gentle tartness. At its peak, brewers exported Grodziskie to 37 countries. Following WWII, the Communists nationalized the Grodziskie brewery, and in typical communist fashion, drove the brewery into the ground and closed the doors in 1993. Professor Fritz Briem resurrected the style a few years ago (Professor Fritz Briem



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Grodziskie) and a few American craft brewers have taken a stab at brewing it. Bill Herlica at White Birch is one of the first to make it a regular, seasonal beer, brewing his First Sparrow every spring. First Sparrow Grodziskie Smoked Wheat Ale (3.8% abv) fills the glass with fizzy gold liquid producing a white foam collar that dissipates with near champagne-like quickness. The smoky wheat aromas evoke a polish sausage and potatoes frying in a pan. The smoke character is fairly light on the palate and is joined by white bread, lemony citrus, moderate hop bitterness and a dose of salt. It is very light and refreshing and a perfect beer for greeting the first sparrow of spring. Beeradvocate.com rates this 86 and rates Professor Fritz Briem's Grodziskie 84. A 22 oz. bottle of First Sparrow costs \$6.99 and a 17 oz. bottle of Professor Fritz Briem's Grodziskie \$8.99.



Up until the 1870s when Louis Pasteur identified the life cycle of the microscopic fungus yeast as responsible for the production of alcohol in wine and beer, brewers attributed the process of alcohol production to rotting, chemical reactions, spirits or divine intervention - Godisgood. Prior to Pasteur, brewers inoculated new batches of beer either by relying on spontaneous fermentation – letting the wort sit and absorb bacteria and yeast from the air or they used existing beer, the slurry off the bottom of a finished batch of beer or the foam off the top to inoculate new batches of beer. There are over 1,000 different species of yeast and at least as many bacteria that can thrive in beer. Yeasts, molds and microbes love malt. Even today scientists use Petri dishes filled with malt extract agar to isolate and grow molds and yeasts so relying on God or Mother Nature to inoculate your beer can be a crap shoot. Pasteur's work allowed brewing scientists such as Carlsberg Brewery's Emil Hansen to isolate individual yeast species and strains, giving brewers

much more control over their finished product. Medieval brewers produced a palatable product through aging in oak barrels and blending different batches and ages of beer together. Oak barrels can add to the flavor of the beer while providing a home to different microorganisms. Flanders Red Ales capture these old techniques producing rustic, wild, complex beers featuring winy, lemony tart flavors with hints of mustiness, fruit, wet horse blanket, and traces of bread. These are beers for slowly sipping and savoring. White Birch Brewing Small Batch Ale Son of Ned the Red (6.5% abv) provides a good introduction to the Flanders Red Ale style. I am drinking a 7 month old bottle that I picked up at South Lyndale Liquors. Age mellows the flavors somewhat and increases the fruit intensity. With proper care these can age for years. Prying off the cap releases rich malt aromas, traces of chocolate and vanilla, a hint of sweetness and tart, lemon seasoned pitted fruit. It pours reddish chestnut with a slight haze under a 1" tan foam cap that provides light lace. The palate starts with a blend of big fruit flavors most suggestive of dark cherries and citrus and faint chocolate and vanilla. There is a light mineraliness in the background. The tart fruit dominates. The body is medium to medium light and the carbonation is crisp and above

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average. It leaves a slight slickness on the tongue. Total Wine is selling Flanders Reds from \$7.90 to \$14.99 for a 22 oz. bottle. They are selling 22 oz. bottles of Son of Ned the Red for \$9.99.



No one knows for sure who invented the wooden barrel but potential sources include ancient central and western European tribes, antique Egyptians and even Vikings. By the early Middle Ages the wooden barrel or cask was the European storage and shipping container of choice and as beer evolved from a local beverage you either drank at the source or carried home in a bucket to a commercial product with wide distribution. Following prohibition and especially during the 1960s stainless steel containers replaced wood. Brewers found them much easier to clean, lighter, cheaper, and less prone to harboring infections, and less prone to allow air in. Within the past few years the wooden barrel has started making a comeback. Craft brewers are developing new flavors and character using wooden barrels – primarily oak. Barrel aging can smooth out a beer and knock off some of the rough edges while imparting the flavor of the wood and flavors from what the barrel may have originally contained such as whiskey, gin, or wine. Bill has released 106 different beers since he opened shop in 2006 and he has aged at least 16 of them in oak barrels. In 2014 he released a barrel aged version of his Hop

Session IPA (5% abv) and I had one 3 months after its release date. Opening the bottle releases a vanilla citrus fresh laundry aroma with some earthy herbal notes. It pours brilliant amber gold while whipping up a stiff, tight 2" finely bubbled off-white foam column with a slight gold tint that slowly descends while etching the glass with a fine lattice work of lace. It leads with a malty herbal attack presenting graham cracker and very faint oak tannins and vanilla. It's not overly sweet. Fruit shows up in the middle with mild melon to a mild tropical fruit and a suspicion of apple. Hop bitterness on the finish is herbal and light citrus rind with a slight presence of tannin. The texture is very creamy soft. The well rounded beer features a nice interplay of texture and flavor supported by a Belgian texture bred with American IPA flavors. The base beer, Hop Session IPA gets an 85 from Beeradvocate.com. Two other guys and I rated the barrel aged version on Beeradvocate.com. I gave it an 85. One guy had an old bottle that had oxidized flavors and didn't like it. The other guy liked it a lot and rated it 76. Total Wine lists 22 oz. bottles of Hop Session Barrel Aged beer at \$5.49. Not a bad price for a barrel aged beer.

Bill Herlica distributes his beer throughout New England, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Ohio, Louisiana and Minnesota. He also has limited distribution in Pennsylvania, Virginia and Georgia. Minneapolis liquor stores 44 France and South Lyndale Liquors sell over the internet and both carry White Birch (as well as many other fine Minnesota brews) for those not in the White Birch distribution area.