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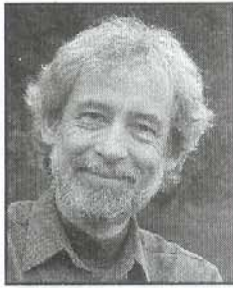
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On-Tap

Greg Evans

"I'll Take the High Road..."

I'm often asked what my favourite style of beer is. I usually quip "the one in front of me". Seriously, if allowed only one style of beer on a desert island, I'd pick Scottish Ale. Now, don't get me wrong. While I thoroughly enjoy a well brewed India Pale Ale, Porter or Extra Special Bitter, it's the full-bodied, malty beers from north of the Tweed that have struck an alliance with my taste buds.

Historically, while Scotland is generally better known for whiskey, it nevertheless has a unique brewing heritage. It's a land that has produced many styles of beer, including heather ale, which apparently worked the ancient Picts into a frenzied state when battling Roman Legions. One style emerged however that became synonymous with this country, shaped, as beer styles often are, by politics and geography.

Geography dictated that barley would flourish in Scotland but not hops, resulting in a strong malt orientation in beers brewed by local brewers. Hop character would be secondary; indeed, other flavourings, such as ginger, aromatic herbs and the aforementioned heather, continued to be used in Scotland long after they had been supplanted by hops to the south in England. The Act of Union, joining England and Scotland together in 1707, further magnified the malt factor by excluding the Scottish from applying any substantial malt excise tax.

Against this backdrop, four main styles emerged, three of which are technically called Scottish ale. They are described by body and alcoholic strength and not colour - Light (2.5-3.5% abv), Heavy (3.5 - 4% abv) and Export (4-5.5% abv). The fourth, called Scotch Ale (7 - 11% abv), is the strongest and referred to as "Wee Heavy." They may also be called 60/-, 70/-, 80/- shilling ales, with Wee Heavies described as 90/- or even 120/- shilling ales. This terminology stems from the time when a beer's invoice price per barrel was recorded in shillings, roughly corresponding to the alcohol content of the beer.

Generally speaking, this style of ale is deep copper to brown in colour, is medium bodied and dominated by a

sweet and smooth caramel like maltiness. This is achieved through a long boil in the brew kettle which caramelizes the sugars and the use of roasted barley for colour and to add a slightly burnt flavour. Extensive cool fermentation is also used to enhance the desired malt character. Hop flavour is normally subtle.

Often available in our local liquor stores, such beers are produced today in Scotland by Belhaven and Traquair House, whose Jacobite Ale commemorates the fact that Bonnie Prince Charles once took refuge in the brewery. Also look for McEwans Scotch Malt, which at 8.5% abv, packs a punch.

Closer to home, Vancouver Island Brewery produces Wolf's Scottish Cream Ale, reminiscent of a 60 shilling ale with a subtle roastiness and mild hop profile. On the Mainland, Granville Island Brewing offers a smooth, seasonal favourite with lots of flavour and a hint of smokiness. Just across the border in Bellingham you'll find Boundary Bay Brewing Co., producers of a hearty, full-bodied Scottish Ale that finishes with a nice hop and malt balance.

Greg Evans is the Executive Director of the Maritime Museum of B.C. and a brewing historian.

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