
BOSTON'S *REAL* BREWER

BY ALEX LOUD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL PIAZZA

Inevitably, when beer and Boston are mentioned in the same sentence, most people will think of one product: Samuel Adams. It is, after all, brewed by The Boston Beer Company and features beers with names like Boston Lager and Boston Ale. By extension, this would suggest that Sam Adams (the man) might well be considered city's most celebrated brewer. Certainly the beer's label seems to imply as much when it classifies the famed revolutionary as a Brewer first and a Patriot second.



Will Meyers

Of course, as with most marketing assertions, the truth is a bit more complex. Sam Adams (the man) was in reality far more successful in the role of Patriot than he was in that of Brewer. Indeed, the real Adams was a brewer only inasmuch as he inherited his father's successful ale house and ran it promptly into the ground. There is also the second uncomfortable reality that much of Sam Adams (the beer) is actually brewed in Cincinnati, Ohio which would largely seem to disqualify it as a New England beer regardless of how many times the word Boston appears on the label.

This has always sort of galled me. Maybe I'm thin-skinned but I've always kind of wanted a better icon for a local beer industry which, to my mind, is one of the finer in the country. Still, it's not like I ever actually went out and tried to find this person who might dislodge the mythical Sam Adams from our collective imagination. Even when presented with the opportunity to write an article on Boston beers, I didn't actively jump into the search. Indeed, my sole intent when I selflessly began sampling beers for this article back in March was to highlight some of the lesser-known, high-quality brews being produced in the Bay State.

In early May, however, things changed when I arranged a "celebrity" tasting of local beers (see sidebar). Although the attendees included a number of local food and beverage experts, the tasting lacked an actual hands-on brewer. With a day to go, I placed a call to Cambridge Brewing Company (CBC) and talked to their Head Brewer, Will Meyers, for the first time. He agreed to join us and bring along a couple of his creations.

Despite living in Cambridge, I hadn't been to CBC in years. If I had ever fixed in my mind just how good their beers were, the memories had long since been covered over by sedimentary layers of vacations, children and the Italian red wines of the late 1990's. As such, when the day of the tasting arrived, I had few notions of what to expect. To be honest, I was more looking forward to tasting Berkshire Brewing's Maibock Lager which I'd been unable to acquire previously.

Having promised to bring two or three beers, Meyers arrived with a groaning box of 6 glass growlers (half-gallon jugs) which he'd pulled from his reserves that afternoon. Sporting a wild variety of colors and an even more varied host of names such as The Wind Cried Mari, Cerise Cassée, and a deeply orange-red I.P.A. mysteriously named Red God, his beers looked positively epic next to the assorted six packs we'd purchased the day before. But then we were professionals. This kind of puffery wasn't going to impress us. Right? Right!

Still, we were impressed to discover that Meyers knew virtually every bottle of beer we opened, every brewer who had created them and could expound at length on their respective methods, histories and philosophies with the uncompetitive delight of an enthusiast. Moreover, as the tasting progressed, it became apparent that the most interesting beers we were sampling all came from CBC. We tasted a number of great beers that evening but Meyers' were consistently the most balanced, the most complex and the ones that drew the most rave reviews. When I later reviewed the tasters' notes, I found comments like "Heaven in a beer" and "Amazing, a masterpiece" applied to his creations.

As the evening wore on and our focus on the actual beers slowly waned, Meyers continued to enlighten us on the finer details of

beer making from the chemical processes involved to the role hops merchants played in the Protestant Reformation. In one fuzzy moment, I remember watching he and Nick Blakey of Bauer Wines debate some utter minutiae of brewing, and thinking, “Wow, I don’t know anything about beer.”

When my editor, who had been in attendance, called me the next day and said, “I think the article should be about Will,” I replied through my Motrin haze that I had been thinking the same thing.

A brewmaster should, as far as I’m concerned, be Germanic-looking, rotund and, preferably, dressed in Lederhosen. Will Meyers—not surprisingly I suppose—doesn’t quite fit this image. He is fit, clean-shaven and appears considerably younger than his 38 years—a result, I imagine, of possessing a job he clearly adores. We met for an interview at CBC on a warm evening a few days after the tasting. The hops plants he maintains were in full leaf on the patio as we sat down to split a cheese plate (with matched beers, of course).

As we sampled his latest seasonal release, a beautiful, cloudy Bavarian-style summer hefeweizen, Meyers explained to me how he came to possess the unlikely title of “brewmaster.” As an Opera Performance major at Bucknell, Meyers had graduated college more prepared to join The Met than a profession that requires its members to spend most of their days in rubber boots. Still, the seeds of his future were there. In addition to a growing realization that opera was unlikely to provide more than a subsistence living, Meyers began to appreciate that his home-brewing hobby was actually more of an obsession. Indeed, in the early 1990’s, Meyers was cooking up so much beer in his house that he simply could not store it. Faced with a creative need to craft new beers, he did what any twenty-something would do with an excess of liquor: he invited his friends over. A lot. At one point, he was having parties as often as once a month. As he described it to me, “In order to be able to brew more beer, I would have to have my friends over to drink it. So we’d have parties where there were six, seven, eight, nine, ten different beers on tap. All 5 gallon batches at a time.”

Meyers’ timing as it turned out, could not have been better. At about the time Meyers started making his kitchen concoctions, regional micro-brews and brewpubs were just beginning to become popular again in the U.S. after a 60 year hiatus brought on by Prohibition and the introduction of country-wide beer brands like Budweiser and Miller. Home-brewing—only legalized by an act of Congress in 1978—lacked the cachet it has today.

Given this environment it was possible for Meyers, who possessed only a few years of self-training and a willingness to bust-ass for no money, to land jobs that today would require a degree from U.C. Davis. The drill was pretty simple and always the same: he would show up first thing in the morning at a brewery, announce that he knew how to clean kegs or mash out a mash tun and didn’t need to be paid. This strategy enabled him to gain experience at number of local brewhouses including Ipswich Brewing Company on the North Shore and Catamount Brewing Company in Vermont.

The real breakthrough, however, came when Meyers learned that the Harpoon Brewery in South Boston offered Friday night tours led by the company’s brewmaster at the time, Tod Mott. Not content to just attend the tastings and drink Harpoon’s fine brews, Meyers began showing up every week with a 6-pack of his own latest creation and, in his own words, ac-



costing Mott. He wanted criticism, educated criticism, about his beers, and Mott, to his credit, provided it week after week. This went on for some months until the day Meyers presented Mott with a Belgian-style raspberry lambic made with yeasts he’d cultured himself from old bottles of imported Belgian beer. When I asked Mott to describe his first impression of the beer Meyers gave him that day, he stated it succinctly: “Holy s**t!” Meyers, sensing his opportunity, immediately asked for a job. When the answer came that Harpoon could not afford to pay, Meyers agreed again to work for free. The next day, at 5:30 in the morning, Mott caught sight of Meyers on the subway and simply shook his head in disbelief.

Meyers landed his first paying job less than a year later when CBC hired him as an assistant. Owner Phil Bannatyne had migrated from northern California for the express purpose of opening a brewpub. He had been close friends and brewing

buddies with Reid Martin, who, along with his brother John, opened America's first post-Prohibition brewpub, Triple Rock Brewery and Alehouse, in Berkeley in 1984. Not wanting to compete with his friends but wanting a similarly educated, cosmopolitan customer-base, Bannatyne chose Cambridge as the spot for his own brewpub which opened in 1989. By the time Meyers came on the scene four years later, the brewery had become so successful that the original full-time brewer, Daryl Goss, was getting worn down from the constant work. Just a few weeks after Meyers joined, Goss stepped back from his job and Meyers suddenly found himself "working 50-60 hours a week...with my hands in every single batch of beer."

The same dedication (Meyers calls it obsessiveness, Mott intensity) that landed him his first "jobs" at Harpoon continues to drive Meyers today. CBC brews four beers that are always on tap: Regatta Golden, Tall Tale Pale Ale, Cambridge Amber, and Charles River Porter. Additionally, Meyers offers a selection of seasonal beers. What really excites Meyers, however—and what keeps droves of beer-o-philes returning regularly to CBC—are his special projects.

Inveterately curious, Meyers has expanded the brewpub's offerings in ways that few of his peers would have the guts, freedom or, frankly, the clientele to do. At any given time, Meyers has more than forty oak barrels of beer aging in the fieldstone cellar beneath CBC. Some are high-alcohol barley wines, some are Belgian style sour beers infused with hundreds of pounds of cherries, others are simply favorite old recipes to which he's applied a new hops varietal, a new yeast or a different aging technique. On any given day, Meyers may be found culturing his own yeast strains, bartering with contacts to secure used bourbon barrels or just doing the mundane work of a brewer; which is to say, brewing beer.

When Meyers took me on a tour of his cellar, it was impossible not to make the mental comparison to a winery or, perhaps more accurately, some ancient sherry house in Spain. Tens of old barrels are racked across the floor and against the walls, all displaying varying colors of wood and levels of distress. Like a

good winemaker, Will carried his thief—a long tube with a flexible bottom stopper that can be opened to withdraw beer from a barrel—so we could taste his creations straight from the barrel. And what we tasted was really quite amazing.

As an example, the first beer we sampled was Meyers' summer barley wine which he calls *Arquebus*—his winter barley wine being *Blunderbuss* (both notoriously heavy, inaccurate guns from the around the 16th Century). Inspired by a late-harvest Riesling dessert wine which owner Phil Bannatyne tried one night, the *Arquebus* is striking to look at as it possesses the caramel red hue of an amontillado sherry. With a recipe that includes blond malts, honey, grapes and even apricots, the beer is long aged in used chardonnay barrels. On the nose, *Arquebus* presents a sweet malty odor, unmistakably a beer. The flavors, however, are much more winey, dominated by notes of pear, apricots and nuts. It is a beautiful, complex drink that really pushes the notion of what a beer should be. The *Arquebus* does, however, check in at a whopping 10.5% alcohol—and, hence, the name. CBC serves it in a wine glass for exactly this reason.

When I asked Tod Mott, Meyers' original mentor, what he thinks of his protégé today, he talked at length about those brewmasters who he feels are moving American beer forward, really working to put American brewing on a par with places like Belgium and Germany that have much longer—or at least uninterrupted—traditions of beer-making. While he modestly does not include himself in this group, he plants Meyers firmly among the best of his peers. Referring to these brewers as pioneers, he said

simply, "Will really happens to be one of those."

And so there you have it. My nomination for Boston's new beer icon: Will Meyers. Brewer. Pioneer.

Sam Adams (the patriot) would, I think, be proud. ❖

When he is not organizing beer tastings, Alex collects wine, writes food articles and helps lead the Slow Food Convivium in Boston. He also has a real-life job and assorted adult responsibilities but those aren't as much fun to talk about.

