

The RARE BEER CLUB

THE SPENCER BREWERY SPENCER, MASSACHUSETTS

MONK'S RESERVE ALE

For many of us lovers of craft beer, our first foray into the world of Belgium's amazing ales came after stumbling across one of the famous Belgian Trappist monastery beers produced by Chimay, Westmalle, Orval, Rochefort, Achel, or, less likely due to its typical absence on these shores, Westvleteren. However, not all of the Trappist breweries are actually located in Belgium, and several new Trappist breweries have opened around the world in recent years. There are now fourteen certified Trappist breweries, all of which are located in Europe, with the exception of this month's featured



brewery—Spencer Brewery, which opened in 2013.

So what is a “Trappist” anyway? “Trappist” is the common term for the monasteries of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, which encompasses dozens of monasteries from around the world. The monks live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, which dates to the 6th century and emphasizes prayer and work. As such, for over six decades the Trappist brothers of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, MA have produced jams & jellies for sale to the public to support the monastery as well as their charitable assistance to the disadvantaged. In recent years, one of the monks took an

interest in brewing and trained at a local brewery. Inspired by him, more monks began to share his interest in brewing—a tradition among monastic communities dating back to the Middle Ages. For two years they gathered info and took multiple trips to visit existing Trappist breweries. Starting with Westmalle and finishing at Sint Sixtus (Westvleteren), the brothers toured around Belgium learning all that they could from their fellow monks—the producers of some of the greatest beers in the world.

Upon completion of their educational
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SPECIFICATIONS

Style

Trappist Quadrupel

Alcohol By Volume

10.2%

Serving Temperature

47–53° F

Suggested Glassware

Chalice, Tulip, or Pinot Glass

travels, the monks of St. Joseph's voted overwhelmingly to launch their own Trappist brewery—America's first! Following Trappist tradition, they named their brewery after the abbey's home of Spencer, Massachusetts. In addition to traditional abbey-style beers, the monks produce styles not typically associated with Trappist breweries, including an IPA (with German and American hops), a German-style Pilsner, a darker "Festive Lager", and more. As one of our featured beers this month, though, we wanted to focus on the brewery's core strength, with their exceptional Monk's Reserve Ale: a full-bodied Trappist quadrupel that's one of the best examples of this style we've found. For more info about the various projects the monks in Spencer are working on, head over to www.spencerabbey.org. And for more about Trappist beers and Trappist monasteries in general, check out the International Trappist Association at www.trappist.be.

MONK'S RESERVE ALE

One of our two featured beers this month is Spencer Brewery's delicious Monk's Reserve Ale, a potent Trappist quadrupel that's a standout example of this harder-to-find style. This beer has seen very limited distribution so

far, with fewer than 100 cases sold in the U.S. this past year, most of which was sold in Massachusetts. As the lone American Trappist brewery, Spencer's been putting together some standout Belgian styles. And the brewers learned from some of the best—having studied from Trappist breweries like Westmalle and Westvleteren.

Monk's Reserve Ale pours a deep, cola-brown color with mahogany accents. Not a ton of light getting through, and this definitely feels like a robust, burly quad from the initial pour. The foam feels Belgian in execution: creamy textured, with tiny bubbles, firm retention, and lacing that coats the interior of the glass. The early aromatics provide a good sense of what's to come, packed with dried dark fruits and some subtle berry character, along with warming medium malt notes that range from caramel and toffee to cola and fresh bread. It's a vibrant combo of maltiness, tempered by a complex fruitiness and white pepper from the ferment.

This is one of the best quads we've crossed paths with in a while. From the first sip, Monk's Reserve Ale offers up layers of rich core malts accentuated by a nicely handled Belgian yeast

character. Any sweetness has been tempered well by the fermentation, removing any stickier maltiness and providing enlivening carbonation alongside bittering elements of pepper and soft clove. At 10.2% ABV, the alcohol stays nicely tucked away and manifests more as that rounded, vinous fruitiness one hopes for in these beers. With time to warm, this quadrupel gradually shows its full breadth of character: incredibly dense maltiness that gets into plum and currant territory, fresh-baked spice bread, a decadent maltiness that keeps on going. It's probably our favorite release ever from Spencer—and a world-class take on the quadrupel.

AGING & PAIRING NOTES:

The brewery suggests storing bottles of Monk's Reserve Ale upright, and provides a best-by date about three or four years after bottling. Quadrupels can be amongst the most satisfying of styles to cellar: hefty in ABV, feisty when young, and built to develop some of those most pleasant aged aspects, like sherry notes and complex caramelization. For pairing: the Monk's Reserve Ale's emphasis on dark fruit has us looking to heartier pork and duck preparations.

The RARE BEER CLUB

LAMBICKX PRIVATE DOMAIN ZENNE VALLEY, BELGIUM

HAND SELECTED LAMBIC

Lambics are essentially the Champagnes of the beer world, and this month we're excited to bring Rare Beer Club members an especially tasty example through the mysterious Lambickx brand. This brand is owned by our importing peeps over at Total Beverage Solution, and the Pajottenland lambic barrels that go into each particular blend are selected and tasted by a team led by Roger Mussche, based upon the diversity, complexity, and wild nature of the lambics. (The approach to these blends came from Mussche and renowned importer Don Feinberg, co-founder of Brewery Ommegang.) Given the super-limited nature of these bottlings, we'll be pulling from both the 2016 and 2015 vintages of Hand Selected Lambic to ensure we have enough for all of our Rare Beer Club members. Most bottles will be from the newer 2016 batch, the 6.5%-ABV version bottled by Brouwerij de Troch in Wambeek, Belgium, with a much, much smaller amount being sourced from the 2015 bottling (5.75% ABV) that was bottled at Brouwerij Strubbe in Ichtegem, Belgium. These have been among the tastiest blended lambics we've had in a long while, and the importer informed us they



don't anticipate bringing this lambic back into the U.S. market anytime soon, so these remaining cases of Hand Selected Lambic are rare indeed. There were 1,866 bottles produced of the newer brewed-in-2014/bottled-in-2016 batch, and 5,579 bottles produced of the brewed-in-2013/bottled-in-2015 release.

The blending of lambics, in terms of how frequently one acquires such expertise, is probably up there with professional hang-gliding. Time and again we've been impressed with how the creators of this series take a diverse set of lambic barrels and make something that feels just effortlessly smooth and expansive—exactly what we're looking for from a well-blended and well-aged sour beer from Belgium. The golden and oak-aged sour beers that went into these bottles in particular are especially smooth, more malty than hoppy, and a touch softer on the sourness. We couldn't ask for tastier lambic blends—and we think our members will agree.

HAND SELECTED LAMBIC

We're pretty darn

thrilled with how this latest rendition of the Lambickx line turned out. It was originally brewed in 2014, then aged in 600-liter French oak barrels before being bottled in 2016. Our sampled batch was limited to 1,866 bottles, and these Lambickx releases saw a minimal presence in the U.S. last year (only 3.5 cases of the 2015, and one case of the 2016). In addition to the 2016 bottling, we'll also be pulling from the few remaining 2015 bottles to make sure that we'll have sufficient lambic for all of our Rare Beer Club members. We were grateful to be able to get enough of this for the Rare Beer Club, as it truly is one of the most mouthwatering and finely tuned lambic offerings we've encountered in a long while.

We opted for our go-to and somehow-not-yet-broken Riedel Veritas glasses for this one, but really anything from tumbler to tulip to flutes seems reasonable. This is very much sparkling, Champagne-like in regards, and a smaller glass that lightly concentrates the aroma seemed to be best

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SPECIFICATIONS

Style

Blended Lambic

Alcohol By Volume

5.75%–6.5%

Serving Temperature

47–55° F

Suggested Glassware

Tulip, Lambic Tumbler, Chardonnay, or Champagne Glass

for us. Your mileage may vary. In terms of temperature range: this one's always tasty, but having a slight chill to it felt most refreshing while still allowing the oak's toastiness out.

This blend got poured gently into our glasses to avoid rousing too much yeast, and these pours tended to have only a modest haze to them. This glows in the glass, though. With a bit of light behind them, our glasses were radiant—honey-golden and sparkling from the steady emergence of tiny bubbles from the bottom. A creamy, similarly fine-bubbled white head is inclined to stick around, leaving a beautiful lacing of bubbles along the side of the glass and being continually replenished from below. The foam from below looks a bit like the surface of the moon. It's up there with the most visually attractive lambics, sending out suggestions of honey notes and lemon and sparking bubbles waiting ahead—all of which are 100% true.

It would be hard to mistake this for something other than lambic, from the aroma forward. That familiar and so-wonderful salinity and lemon and funk. The aromatics on this version of Lambickx are especially focused around vibrant core citrus notes of sweet pomelos and lemons, that sense of full fruit: pith and zest and all sorts of accompanying tartness. This

is mouthwatering, doing everything in its little lambic wizardry book to make you want a sip. Along with that focus on tart fruit is an enormous amount of secondary complexity via its non-fruity elements and oak-barrel aging: hints of vanilla and almond and toasted barrel. A subtle blue-cheese and funky edge do the perfect amount of work providing that authentic lambic feel. We kept on going back to the aroma on this one for the good part of an hour. As this warms up further, some elegant notes of fresh-cut apple and pear emerge as well.

And yeah...it tastes pretty delicious, too. (Our complaints card would be empty.) Everything promised by those aromatics plays out in perfect measure, with that just-fizzy-enough CO₂ providing lift for all of the different elements here. While the aroma tends to land more on the sour citrus side, the impact here's a bit more balanced: juicy tart lemon and grapefruit, a toasty counterpoint of oak and white pepper, and the salinity and funk combine for what's ultimately bracing but undeniable refreshment sip after sip. This is gorgeous lambic: smooth, masterfully blended, sitting in our lucky glasses and being savored slowly. The blending of lambic is one of the world's tastiest and rarest skillsets—and it's on world-class display here.

We hope you dig this one as much as we do. Lambic is definitely one of those styles that, in those instances where we find exceptional examples, can push pretty much every single one of our happy buttons. There's bracing tartness to remind us we're alive and the world's weird right now. There's immense complexity and depth, nudging us against our worldly cynicism. There's the effervescence. The subtle tannins and occasional appearance of oak... Drink up.

AGING & PAIRING NOTES:

Both the 2016 and 2015 bottlings are drinking beautifully at the moment, but we wouldn't be surprised if these lambic blends developed even more with some additional time in the cellar. While some lambics could go decades, we aren't super familiar with aging the Lambickx line, which has less than a decade behind it. But these feel primed to just keep on developing. As for pairings: we're inclined to use that refreshing acidity and CO₂ against fattier fare, such as creamier cheeses, turkey, duck, etc. We'll very likely set aside some of this for Thanksgiving.

BEYOND THE BOTTLE: THE LAMBIC LIFE FOR ME

BY KEN WEAVER

Over the past five years or so, give or take, kettle sours have served to shift how people think about "sour beers." Ten years ago, sour beer would more likely have been a mixed-fermentation example: a Belgian lambic, maybe, or a non-Belgian riff on lambic, probably aged in oak, probably for months or years. The yeast and bacteria involved in these complex fermentations take their sweet time. But with the rise of quick- or kettle-souring techniques, in which a firm presence of lactic acid is created basically overnight (by various means, only some of which involve yogurt), brewers can churn out lemony-tart "sour beers" super fast.

Except... they usually aren't like the beers that made this space interesting in the first place.

If you dig kettle sours: that's great. As the beer world expands, there's a beer for everyone at this point—and that part's cool as hell. But it also means there is more stuff that's gonna be well outside of one's wheelhouse. I love hazies, and loathe milkshake IPAs. I was grateful to see the doubly-coarse abomination that was black IPA

meet an early end. And I honestly do not get the ongoing presence of one-note kettle sours—which felt like a bad idea years ago.

Once I remove the kids from my lawn, and once that massive cartooning windfall comes in (still waiting), I plan to fill the garage with lambic. The upside of kettle sours, for me and my wife, and frankly the majority of our peeps out here, is we can now magically find lambic on the shelves of California (albeit at sub-magical prices). Some of my favorite beer experiences have been from sour beers that take years to develop and benefit from careful blending skills that aren't on the back of a yogurt container. I hope kettle sours continue to improve; there are definitely some Berliner-esque weisses and pseudo-goses that come across well. But, for now, I want nothing to do with that 9% sour IPA with pluot puree. The lambic life for me.

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