

A LOT OF GOOD



WITH SO MUCH WINE

filling the pages of SONOMA, we feared some form of fermented foment would be visited upon us if we didn't pay our respects to the county's other beverage, beer. It does, as they say, take a lot of good beer to make a little good wine and lately a lot of good beer is what's being brewed all over the county.

Sonoma beer is attaining the clout and complexity it deserves, thanks to superbly skilled, artful microbreweries like the Valley's fledgling Sonoma Springs Brewing Co., the Russian River Brewing Co., Bear Republic Brewing Co. in Healdsburg, Santa Rosa's Moonlight Brewery, Sebastopol's HopMonk and, of course, Petaluma's heavyweight I.P.A. champ, Lagunitas.

So if you think beer is just bivouacking on Wine Country's back lots, think again. A bold and full-bodied beer culture has taken up permanent residence, and we've highlighted a couple of our favorite brews and brewmeisters.

And here's one more thing for you unconvinced winos: to sufficiently scandalize the misty, leatherbound arcanum of all your oenological record books, beer is older than wine. That's right. Our hoary Nordic mead swiller trumps your lute-playing syrah-sipping fawn.



PHOTO BY SARAH BERKLEY

At ease in the company of wine barrels full of beer, Russian River Brewing Company's Vinnie Churlico savors a glass full of bugs and the beast.

THE BEAST & THE BUG & THE BARREL

STORY SARAH BERKLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY ROBBI PENGELLY

Winemakers, leave the room. This story is headed in a different direction and reading it could be bad for your brix.

We're here to talk about beer but not, of course, just any beer and not just any brewmaster. We're here to explore some of the riskiest and most bewitching beer you'll ever drink and the mad, microbe-manipulating alchemist behind Russian River Brewing Co.

What we have here is beer that hibernates for months, even years, in—gasp—wine barrels, beer that smells like wine, beer that goes down like a ruddy adventure novel, running wild and ripe and gamey over your tongue. Beer that pucks your lips with a sour siren song. And when we say sour, we mean it. Very much.

Making that beer is Vinnie Churlico, former employee and now owner of the acclaimed Santa Rosa microbrewery whose double I.P.A. (India Pale Ale), Pliny the Elder, has achieved cult superstardom in the beer world and more than one gold medal at the annual World Beer Cup. And seeing as how Vinnie isn't looking to fix an ancient Roman philosopher that ain't broke (that would be Pliny), he's focused on perfecting his four funky barrel-aged beers.

Vinnie's mental wheels have always been churning on how to get great beer from a wine barrel.

"My idea was to take a favorite component out of traditional lambic ale—*brettanomyces*—and use it in conjunction with some local wine barrels. I thought it would be a great combination—to take one of our Belgian beers, funk it up with brett and let the wine barrels add a little to it." So Vinnie started experimenting, and the rest is proverbial history.

Most brewers hang their hats on hops, but Vinnie Churlizo prefers to manipulate microbes into complex flavor equations.

Brettanomyces: Known in shorthand as “brett,” and by discriminating winemakers as a devilish barnyard-smelling beast, brett is an invasive wild yeast sometimes caught interloping in wine and often scorned as a “common defect.” But it’s a close friend of Vinnie’s, a central component of traditional Belgian lambic ales, and he uses it with abundance in many of his beers. Hence the reason some winemakers won’t even set foot in Vinnie’s brewpub. They’re afraid.

“A simple solution was offered: Keep a smudge pot burning at the door of our brewery so they can burn their clothes when exiting, but even that was not enough,” says Vinnie. “Most winemakers think we’re crazy.”

Brett isn’t the only key ingredient. Meet the bugs, Lacto and Pedio. Lactobacillus and pediococcus are friendly anaerobic bacteria you’ll find in your own gut or in cultured dairy products like yogurt. You’ll also find them in most of Vinnie’s barrel-aged beers, upon which they impress a refreshing sour quality. Brewers don’t like them much because if they escape they can contaminate all your equipment. Once again, they’re friends of Vinnie’s. Are you sensing a pattern?

“Most of the (industry information) out there is written on how to get rid of stuff we’re trying to encourage,” says Vinnie. “I was just out (at a local wine lab) and on the desk was a sheet for a workshop on how to detect brettanomyces.” As far as beer brewers, “A lot of them think it’s really cool and would love to do what we’re doing, but there are still brewers out there that say, ‘I don’t have the guts to do it. I’m afraid of the cross-contamination.’”

Here’s the simplified recipe for Vinnie’s



concoctions: make beer, add brett when it goes into the barrel, add lacto and pedio when appropriate, and let it all stew for a spell on the wood. The unique pièce de résistance of Vinnie’s methodology is the judicious matching of varietal-specific wine barrels to different styles of beer so as to influence the flavor outcomes.

Vinnie’s brews squat in the barrels for 12 to 24 months, picking up the flavors of the previous tenants. Because of this, they take on a startling complexity. Take, for example, his dark Belgian-style ale, Consecration.

“We wanted to use cabernet barrels

because of the flavors—often you’ll get chocolate, tobacco, hints of fruit and currants.” This profile perfectly aligns with the flavors Vinnie wanted to achieve with the ale. Using a dark malt lends the beer a rich chocolate character, and the addition of currants provided some fruitiness and secondary sugar for the ravenous brett to start working on while still in the barrel.

“These beers are hard to control. They



are never the same from batch to batch, from year to year. That’s why it’s so different from regular brewing, where 90 percent of the time you’re trying to make the exact same beer.”

The results are complex, with aromas recalling wine, but a taste you will either love or hate. In this heaven or hell, just check the name on the bottle. Do you want to be saved or damned? Consecrated or tempted? Vinnie’s not in this for the in-betweens.

His original sour beer, Temptation, is an inimitable blond ale aged in French oak chardonnay barrels and refermented in the bottle to achieve its carbonation. (It uses brett but no bugs.) It’s fascinating and lemony.

Then you’ve got Supplication, a brown ale aged in French oak pinot noir barrels chock-a-block with brett, bugs and sour cherries. There’s the aforementioned Consecration, a dark ale aged in cab sauvignon barrels with an incriminating dash of currants. Beatification, the reclusive loose cannon, relies on a wilderness cocktail of bugs and brett; the rest is pure wizardry. It’s primordial beer. It’s beer for spear hunters. It’s how beer was made thousands of years ago and in its

turbid depths you might just find the Big Bang if you look hard enough (or drink long enough).

For those who have never tried one of these sour, barrel-aged beers, Vinnie administers some words of advice.

“If you’ve never had one of these beers, it can be a psychological disadvantage to your palate, meaning, it’s a leap, because your palate doesn’t even know this type of flavor can exist. It’s really going to make you pucker and your mouth water, so after you take the first sip and know what to expect, try it again.”

Once you’ve got your sour sea legs about you, the range and depth of flavor can be extremely appealing, and pairing the beers with food offers a whole new avenue to explore.

Fortunately for Vinnie and the American craft-beer industry, he’s not alone in his barrel-aged beer servitude.

A cross-continental support group of barrel-aged brethren trade notes on their advances in the chemistry of barrel-aged and brett-ridden beer. The following for this beer is still small, but when you’re converted, you’ll cross over to a permanent acolyte. S

Whether you age it in barrels, buckets or kegs, brewing beer still requires large vats, like these at Sonoma Springs brewpub, for heating the mash and boiling the wort.

It's primordial beer. It's beer for spear hunters. It's how beer was made thousands of years ago.

THE BEER ENGINEER

STORY SARAH BERKLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY ROBBI PENGELLY

Ah, the alchemy of good beer. Water, yeast, malted grain, hops. It feels like such a quaint, provincial equation, and yet rattling off those four ingredients is where the simplicity ends and the darkling tide of chemistry begins.

Chemistry from which—after a thousand bubbly incantations—our brew emerges from behind steel and oak curtains, irrevocably transformed. And at Sonoma Springs Brewing Company, the only simplicity you'll ever encounter in the deep, fragrant storm cloud of beer in your glass is the simple ease with which it goes down.

There's a primitive comfort to good beer's complexity. While wine strives to tether its story to a geographic place, beer makes a humble home in its glass. Surely, it can be regional, but at its best, good beer is a deconstructionist's drink.

And if you are going to deconstruct, Sonoma Springs Brewing Company is Sonoma's newest, arguably truest and coziest artisan enterprise to explore the component parts of, say, a premium Hefeweizen.

We'll meet owners Tim and Ann Goeppinger and step inside their copper vat in a moment, but first let's put this in a little local context—some history on how Sonoma Valley beer has fared in the past: It hasn't.

While wineries have multiplied like Bacchanalian bunnies, breweries have dropped like flies. Their ghosts are everywhere; the old stone relic housing Vella Cheese originally made beer before succumbing to Prohibition. Local wine czars the Benzigers once dabbled in estate-grown lagers with their ill-fated Sonoma Mountain Brewery, before ripping out the hapless hops and turning their production facility into what's now Imagery Estate Winery.

Before the Red Grape there was Siena Red Brewery, which didn't last two years,

Sonoma Springs Brewing Company steps into the Promethean shadow of legendary (and long-defunct) pioneer, New Albion Brewery.



and hovering above these failures is the Great Spirit of Sonoma suds, the legendary pioneer New Albion Brewery. Oft hailed as the lost vanguard that launched America's microbrewing culture, New Albion's rustic operation was founded in Sonoma in 1976 by merchant seaman turned homebrew enthusiast Jack McAuliffe. For six years, New Albion churned out 150 barrels a week of boutique ales, porters and stouts from rented space in a fruit warehouse on Eighth Street East, until it fell out of business and into a permanent state of hagiography—as America's patron saint of microbrewing. Now, enter Sonoma Springs Brewing

Company, more than two decades later with no less a Promethean task.

But Tim has done his homework, he knows the history and he's up to the challenge. To him, the rich and unfiltered Bavarian-style wheat ales he's crafting are perfectly suited to Wine Country's palate.

"I think those breweries were all a little different in what they were doing," he says. "I felt if I brought some oaked beer to the public and kept things creative (it would succeed)."

The lion's share of Northern California beers have won notoriety for their raging hoppiness, and some of those edgy

hyperbolic concoctions "can be overdone," suggests Ann, with a nicely diplomatic voice. "People come in here, and say 'Wow! This is different. This has a lot of flavor,' and they don't realize that none of that flavor is coming through the hops; it's really coming through the yeast."

Adds Tim, "The wine drinker's palate, being here in Sonoma, lends itself to a beer such as a Hefe or a Rogen, which have spice and fruit aspects to them." While beer and wine cultures are doubtless their own creatures, "they can coexist" and at Sonoma Springs, "We're trying to bridge the gap."

For brewmaster Tim Goeppinger, the secret to great beer is found more often through the lens of a microscope than in a handful of hops.

The menu board at Sonoma Springs is sprinkled with Germanic syllables evoking earthy flavors.



Tim has tried winemaking, of course, but beer is the brew that tugs his heartstrings. It also feeds his proclivity for scientific tinkering. To him, beer and the beer-making process harbors as much complexity as wine.

"Even though there are far more varietals of wine, there are more variables in brewing—the malt, the hops, the yeast, the quality of water." The endless X factor of beer's chemical charisma has captured Tim completely. He has permanent beer goggles. Originally an engineering major at Northwestern, the Illinois native unwittingly found a lifetime's worth of lab science at the bottom of a beer barrel. (Actually, he fortuitously chanced upon a homebrewing guide in a trash Dumpster, and he never turned back. Don't bother asking what he was doing there.) After cutting his teeth working for major brewing enterprises—from Firestone in Paso Robles to Lagunitas to Russian River Brewing Co., Tim and Ann finally took the proverbial leap of faith and sallied forth with their own beer company.

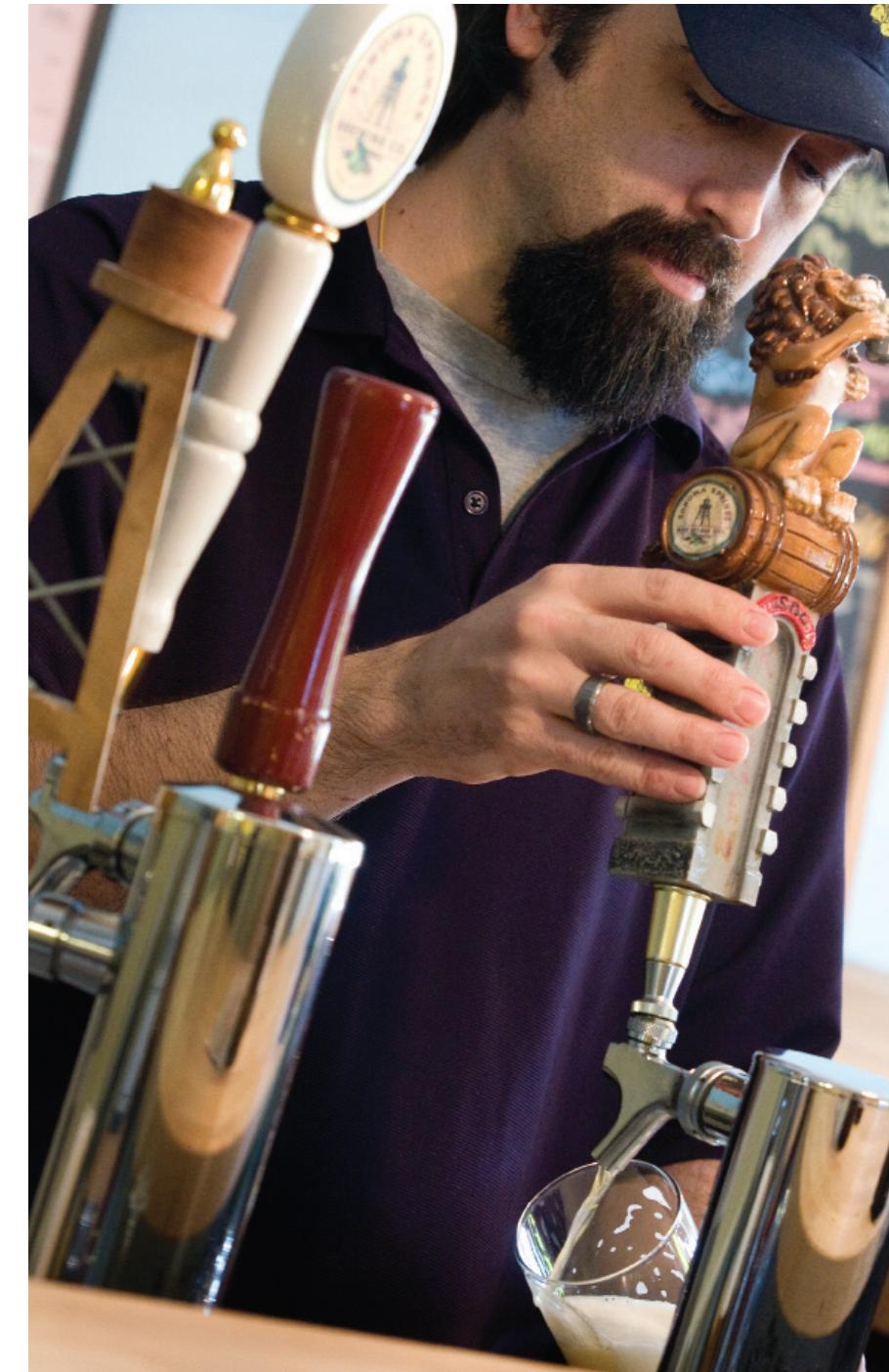
And so far, so good. Walk into their spare tasting room on West Napa Street and you sense it. People are chiefly here to try the beers, of course, because the beer is downright breathtaking, but the people are

also here for the people, and the sense of camaraderie—a bit of barstool brotherhood, if you will. Tim and Ann—while they don't outwardly intend to serve as a neighborhood Cheers—seem to be adapting just fine in their new living room. They are ultra-laid-back and marvelous beer guides. Tim loves to wander off in the direction of technical brew-speak if you let him, and this is never a problem because the beer wouldn't be as good if he didn't talk about tertiary fermentations with the moony-eyed fervor of the amorous artiste and the brass tacks of a seasoned specialist.

And the beers are, in a word, moony-eyed. What can one say? They're Bavarian. They're murky and mountainous; some ascend to crisp, sunlit heights, others dig your tastebuds deep into loamy forest floors, cloves and smoke. Some brandish subtle sweetness, like honey or banana. They all glow a little in the glass, like windows with fogged-up panes. These are brews that welcome you inside, waiting for Sonoma Valley gastronomes to discover, then blog, about perfect food pairings, or what Vella cheese they augment.

As of now, you'll find only pretzel dishes

www.sonomamag.com



at Tim and Ann's, but you won't care. You can slake your thirst on the crisp and spicy "Volkbler" with underpinnings of apricot; the dark and malty, chocolate wheat-kissed abyss of the Divine Harvest Dunkelweissbier; or the Munich Dark Lager, which boasts the added depth of being fermented in zinfandel barrels. Some beers are available in the bottle, such as the sun-dappled, uplifting and ever-so-fragrant Hefe; a Roggen—or "rye"—beer brimming with spice and earth and caramel; and the most recent pièce de résistance, "ISIS" or Sonoma Kriek, a

www.sonomamag.com

Sonoma Kriek is a spectacular brew, aged in a zin barrel and fermented with fresh Green String Farm cherries and a hint of wild yeast.

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IT'S SWELL TO SWILL

When it comes to beer tasting, there's a wealth of watering holes in Sonoma to taste great beer on tap:



STORY SARAH BERKLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY ROBBI PENGELLY

The Wine Exchange: Mugwort and bee balm, wormwood and candy cap mushrooms. It's not a witch's cauldron we're talking about at the Wine Exchange, it's Dan Noreen's great Beer Experiment. Just belly up to the tasting bar and proprietor Dan Noreen is bound to cast a spell on you with his revolving anthology of madcap, provocative and ingenious brews on tap—frothy masterpieces which he hopes will broaden your horizons and bewitch your taste buds. The shop sells more than 250 beers and by all means, Dan proffers some definitive classics on draft: "beers like Sierra Nevada Celebration Ale. Those are a huge crowd favorite." But once caught in the commodious clutches of the connoisseur behind the bar, it would be worth your while to follow the twinkle in Noreen's eye and try his more deviant-yet insanely delightful-local selections. Case in point, Moonlight Artemis. Crafted by critically worshipped Moonlight Brewery out in rural Santa Rosa, the ingredients of this hops-free seductress include mugwort, mint and bee balm, resulting in herbal overtones and a sort of "unique and citrusy cadence," says Dan. Or there's Santa Cruz-based Uncommon Brewers' rare Rubidus Red, a supple copper ale brewed with maple sugar and candy cap mushrooms. Or Mendocino Brewing Company's award-winning Eye of the Hawk, a smooth, strong and malty Scotch-style ale hailed by one international judge as the "Harley Davidson of American beers."

While he likes to support local brewers, Dan also boasts a choice array of European imports, one of them being none other than an elusive Belgian ale he's waited for (the draft version of) for thirty years—Duvel Green Draught. To capture its essence, Dan unleashes a multitude of descriptives for this suave single-fermented beer, but it really boils down to the radiance of Dan's face at the mere mention of it. "This beer is just amazing," he gushes. At this point, it becomes clear that in this world, there are beer drinkers and then there are beer lovers. If you fall into the latter camp, you and Dan will get along.

452 1st St E, Suite C in Sonoma.
Drop by during business hours,
go to www.wineexsonoma.com or call 938.1794

Murphy's Irish Pub: In Sonoma's beloved Irish living room, you can come for the Guinness and stay for the Smithwick's. Or the Fuller's ESB. Or the Bass Ale. Or the Boddington's. Murphy's offers all the trusted, time-tested and familial touchstones (or should we say Blarney Stones?) of the United Kingdom and Europe, plus some local staples (i.e. Lagunitas IPA) and a seasonal wild card that they rotate regularly.

464 1st St E in Sonoma.
Go to www.sonomapub.com or call 935.0660.

Sonoma Springs Brewery: In a tasting room so cozy you could put in your pocket, Tim and Ann Goeppinger serve up oaked Bavarian wheat ales with more personality and charm than 100 yodeling grandmother from Gestaadt. You'll also find Sonoma Springs brews across Valley restaurants including (but not limited to) Mondo Sonoma, The Carneros Bistro & Wine Bar and Emmy's Spaghetti Shack.

750 W. Napa St. in Sonoma.
Go to www.sonomaspringsbrewery.com or call 938.7422

Mondo Sonoma: Nothing goes better with pulled-pork sandwiches and fried Vella cheese poppers than one of Mondo's 23 judiciously chosen draft beers. A preponderance of patrons come specifically to Mondo to slake their thirst on Russian River's superstar I.P.A. Pliny the Elder, says owner Dean Castelli, but there are plenty of other equally delicious drafts on the menu, which reads like an impressive laundry list of the American West's microbrew standouts—from New Belgium's zesty Mothership Wit to Bear Republic Racer 5 I.P.A.; Speakeasy Prohibition Ale, Moonlight Brewery's Death and Taxes, North Coast's Scrimshaw Pilsner and many more.

875 W Napa St in Sonoma.
Go to www.mondosonoma.com or call 938.8013

Steiner's Tavern: Do we even need to mention the infamous and motley Steiners Tavern? Yes, we do. Because in this day and age of economic and emotional uncertainty, there is a noble niche for Sonoma's truest, bluest and pluckiest tavern. Because sometimes you do need a Coors. My husband knows the quiet satisfaction of a cold Pabst Blue Ribbon, his value beer of choice. Pabst, says Steiners owner Paul Spadaro, is actually making a sort of hip comeback for that very reason; "We call it the econobeer." Of course Steiners offers plenty of other international heavyhitters, domestic blue chips and mega-microbrews. Stella Artois, Anchor Steam, New Belgium Fat Tire, Widmere Hefeweizen, you get the picture.

465 1st St. W in Sonoma. Call 996.3812.

Countywide, our favorite spots are **Russian River Brewing Company's** brewpub and **Third Street Ale Works** (both in Santa Rosa,) **Bear Republic Brewing Co.** in Healdsburg and the swank **HopMonk Tavern** in Sebastopol, where you can nosh on fall mussels and sweet potatoe fries while quaffing a decadent dunkelweizen. (It's next to the beautiful Joe Rodota bike trail so you can sweat away the calories afterward.) S