

ULLAGE AND SPILLAGE

by J.Random

I was reading in the national media that the latest craze in certain bars is the beer cocktail, meaning beer plus spirits and fruit juice. I guess this builds on the classic lager and lime or lager and black, blackcurrent that is, from the UK. Neither appeals to me; certainly not canned beer-pop, but Iain Hill's upmarket version with cassis, Bir Royale, does sound a bit tempting. Perhaps you might want to make cocktails with the products of the mega-breweries but I don't think craft beers should be adulterated with blue curacao or crème de menthe. We have experienced some superb Scotch ales and bourbon-amended stouts from our Pacific Coast brewers, but these are either produced through, or designed to simulate, maturation in casks formerly used to mature the grain-based spirits. Through the mysteries of synchronicity, the subject of beer blends came up, independently from two sources, and it occurred to me that is a time-honoured tradition that merits revisiting.

Our craft brewers produce a wide range of great beers, but sometimes you just fancy something between styles. The Black and Tan seems to be the most common blend these days, though different producers have different interpretations. In some cases the black is a stout, in others a porter. The tan can be pale ale or bitter. Fat Cat Brewing produces bottled Bunny's Black and Tan which is a mixture of porter and India pale ale. Pubs where they won't look at you strangely when you ask for a Black and Tan include Yaletown and Mission Springs. If the relative densities of the two beers is sufficiently different, they can be carefully layered. Otherwise they will mix. By the way, don't go into a bar in Ireland and state in a loud voice that you like black and tans. In that part of the world they still remember the paramilitary force dressed in police pants and army shirts that got somewhat out of control in the 1920s.

In the UK, at least 25 years ago, quite a few people drank Mild and Bitter, tough to do in B.C. unless DIX has their seasonal mild available and you can sneak out of Subeez with a half of Crannog

bitter. Not many North American brewers use those UK terms. As I remember, there was no distinctive name for that combination. It was typically called, eponymously, "mild and bitter." Another popular mix in the UK was "old and bitter," otherwise known as 'a mother-in-law.' Porter is said to have been originally invented as a beer brewed to replicate the flavour of a blend called three threads which was supposedly dark ale, pale ale and stale ale. That is why some brewers deliberately try to give their porters a little acetic edge. It seems more likely the combination was mild ale, pale ale and old ale. Pale ale was the colour of a UK bitter, only pale by comparison to mild or old ale.



Black & Tan (a safe one)

Furthermore, old ale was not beer that had been hanging around a while, but beer brewed in the old style: dark because it was impossible to kiln malt accurately without burning a few grains, strong because all beers were stronger before wartime regulations and sweet because the yeast strains were not highly attenuating. King and Barnes old ale is one of the few that are still made in the UK as far as I am aware.

Another common combination was a half of

draft bitter topped up with bottled pale ale from the same brewery; Ramrod and Special was the version in Young's pubs. I was never entirely clear on this concept since, in many cases, the beer in the bottle was the same product as the beer on draft. Not strictly a beer blend, lager and cider is appropriately known as 'snakebite.' To my mind the drink is about as pleasant as its namesake and about as welcome.

There may be other well known mixes I can't bring to mind, but it is time to turn to some more recent ideas and appropriate names. A blend that I have often enjoyed over the past few years is a mixture of two beers from the mystic East; more precisely from Quebec and Nova Scotia. McAuslan's St Ambroise oatmeal stout can sometimes be aggressively roasty, if you don't age it a few months, and Propellor ESB softens it beautifully. I call this blend a Black Adder because it is a lot more fun than a snakebite. I have also had occasion to mix Tree Hophead IPA with their Cutthroat pale ale when whatever I am eating has over-pacified my taste buds. Fortunately this has never resulted in a Head Cut. A combination that comes to mind, and therefore must be attempted soon, is Scottish ale and IPA. That would be a Bogus ESB.

Recently, there seems to have been a burgeoning of ideas around beer blending among CAMRA Vancouver members. During our summer heat wave, treasurer Rae Collins came up with the combination of pilsner and IPA, which I immediately dubbed a Bitter-Pil. Credit goes to president Rick Green for suggesting the Imperial Black and Tan which is imperial Russian stout with IPA. I recommend the coast to coast version: North Coast's Rasputin combined with Lost Coast's Indica. Make that imperial stout and imperial IPA and you would have to call it A Day. Finally, in honour of our two dearly departed members, departed to Halifax that is, I would like to name their blend of Racer 5 IPA and Red Racer IPA an Adam and Gillian after the two IPA lovers. After all, "why would you dilute IPA?"

So why not try a few beer blends, whether at the pub or at home. You may come up with one worth sharing through the pages of this highly esteemed publication. §