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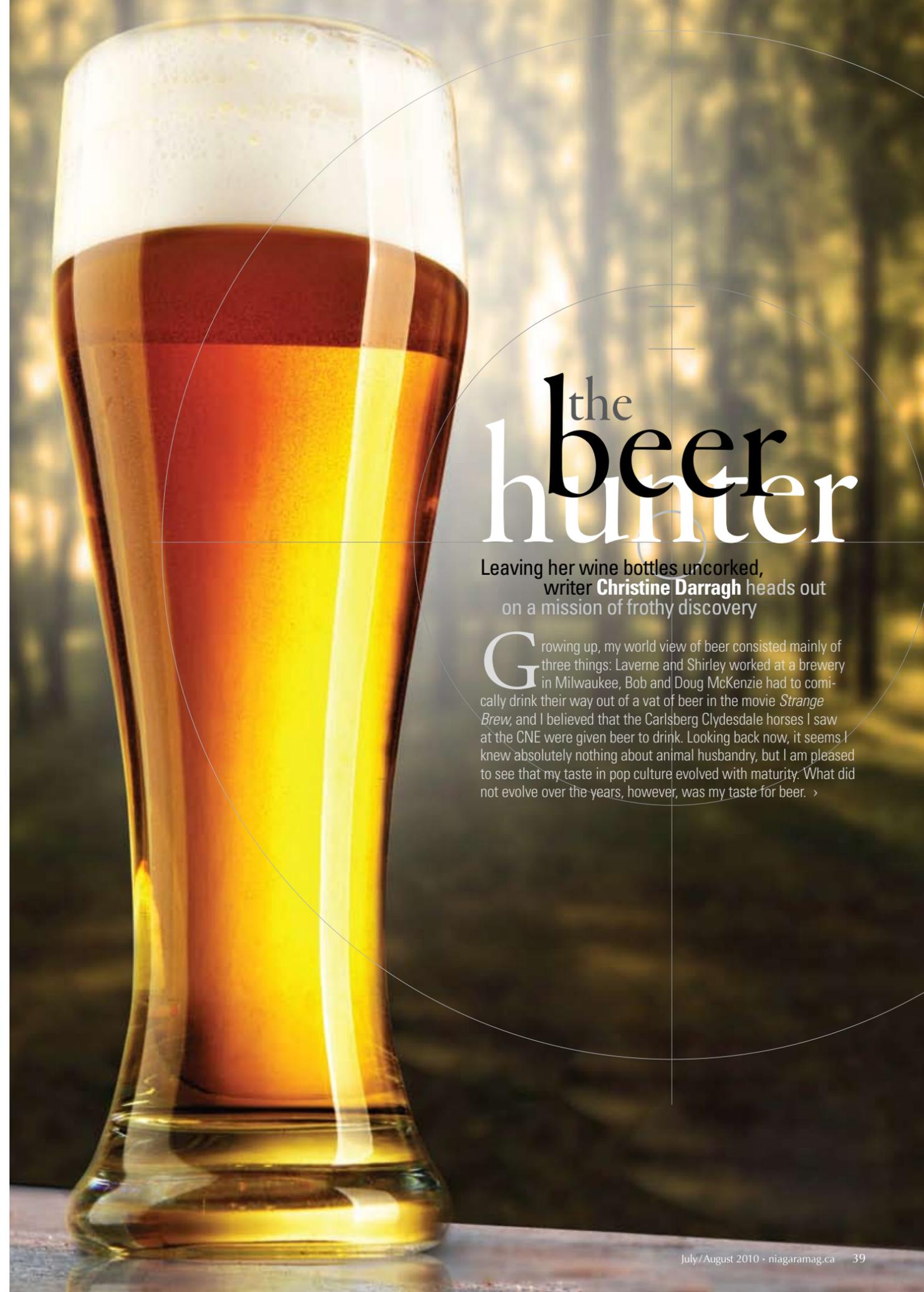


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the beer hunter

Leaving her wine bottles uncorked, writer **Christine Darragh** heads out on a mission of frothy discovery

Growing up, my world view of beer consisted mainly of three things: Laverne and Shirley worked at a brewery in Milwaukee, Bob and Doug McKenzie had to comically drink their way out of a vat of beer in the movie *Strange Brew*, and I believed that the Carlsberg Clydesdale horses I saw at the CNE were given beer to drink. Looking back now, it seems I knew absolutely nothing about animal husbandry, but I am pleased to see that my taste in pop culture evolved with maturity. What did not evolve over the years, however, was my taste for beer. >

the beer hunter

Oh sure, people tried their best to woo me over to a dark brew or a pale ale. “You just need to try Brand X or Brand Y,” they’d say. But through it all, my taste buds refused to tingle and my palate remained unimpressed . . . until lately, that is.

All the positive buzz about beer is getting hard to ignore. A few things in particular have recently piqued my attention: Beer has gone ultra chic, amazing health benefits are being touted, and there is an evident boom in the craft/micro brewery market. Could it be that developing an appreciation for beer might swiftly join together three of my favourite things: staying healthy, supporting the local food movement, and attempting to increase my coolness quotient? I suddenly feel maybe I’ve misjudged beer all this time, and it just might again deserve “the old college try,” as they say.

So, leaving my wine bottles uncorked, I head out on a mission of frothy knowledge.

It’s true, the beverage associated with beer bellies, foolhardy frosh mischief, and the never-flattering dual beer hat with built-in straws, has long suffered from an image problem. It would seem to the casual observer that somewhere between “mr. blue collar everyman” and “legion of bikini-clad, buxom babes,” there should lie an untapped area of golden marketing potential. In a world where beer is the oldest and most consumed alcoholic drink, and the most popular beverage after water and tea (take that, wine!), its appeal should not be limited to outdated, overused stereotypes.

Lucky for the suds, North America is clearly embracing a new demographic of beer drinkers. It’s a thriving group with sophisticated palates and discerning tastes, and most of them are being lured by the unique, quality product offered by emerging craft and micro breweries. These beers, made by small, independent producers using traditional methods, are only brewed from the finest, natural ingredients—barley and wheat malts, select hops, filtered water and unique yeast strains, without a trace of nasty preservatives—thereby elegantly redefining what people have come to expect in a beer. Eric Martin, owner of the Niagara Falls-based craft brewery, Taps Brewing Company, points out, “As people come in and try our products they find there is more to beer than mass-produced fizzy corn water. We bring out the natural goodness of the ingredients to make delicious beers that suit different palates.” And as more people “trade up” from those mass produced versions, the dedication of the craft-inspired brewmaster to bring out the best in this drink is really starting to be appreciated.

Once people try a new and interesting brew that embodies a passion for the real craft of beer making, there is an excitement for what is possible and plenty of variety to hold one’s attention. For the foodie, special ales, lagers, and stouts are now found alongside wine as recommended pairings to complement sophisticated cuisine in fine eateries. It is now also commonplace to find menu items incorporating a unique, craft beer as that “special ingredient” in a flavourful barbecue sauce, spicy chili, or decadent chocolate cake. Beer isn’t just for battering your fish anymore. Check out the ontariocraftbrewers.com recipe section for some truly inventive ideas!

Spurred on by the superior taste offered through smaller breweries, there is a cult following of immense proportions developing as these types of beers become part of a person’s trendy image and lifestyle, similar to an all-consuming commitment to a certain brand of clothing, computer, or car. It seems that a variety or style of beer greatly enjoyed is yet another distinctive element worthy of adding to a profile page. Simply searching the key words “craft beer” on Facebook or Twitter is proof positive of this evolving devotion. And if you should ever find yourself longing for some face-to-face social media, you can even join other craft beer fans by travelling to the various festivals around North America that celebrate this movement and all that this growing culture offers.

This unabashed enthusiasm has drawn comparisons from food and wine experts to the sort of renaissance that happened in the wine sector about 25 years ago. At that time, when a bottle of Baby Duck would have been considered the height of chic, but is now considered gauche by most for its obvious lack of panache, many wine consumers lacked a true appreciation for the desirable qualities that distinguish a great wine. Fast-forward a quarter century. Through clever wine marketing, greater selection, and increased public knowledge, it seems you can’t spin a bottle in our current culture without landing on a self-described “wine aficionado.” As the number of craft breweries continues to multiply along with the dedicated fervour of devotees, David Lipman, publisher of *Beer and Brewer Magazine*, remarks, “Beer is the new wine. We’re seeing a huge growth in craft brewing because consumers are becoming more educated and they’re recognizing there are beers with flavour to them.”

Specifically, the Niagara region is wisely building on the tourism already present with its wine industry and is attempting to also make it a location synonymous for craft brewing expertise. Starting in September 2010, Niagara College is answering a demand in the industry to provide skilled professionals in the art of craft brewing. By

creating a two-year diploma in Brewmaster and Brewery Operations Management, the school will work in partnership with the Ontario Craft Brewers Association and will be the first in Canada to provide this level of training.

Corresponding with the rise in interest in craft brewing are the well documented health benefits of brewed beverages. It seems we mostly hear about the blessings of wine, but beer is clearly comparable, if not

a U.K. medical researcher. “Unlike some other high-silicon foods, (we now know) the silicon in beer is readily absorbed because it exists as soluble silicate.” Exciting news to those looking for a way to increase their silicon levels for health reasons!

Furthermore, experts say it’s not fair blaming beer for that dreaded beer belly. Since the caloric value is similar in many types of alcohol, it is rather the occurrence of a sedentary lifestyle and repeated consump-

Varied styles of beers, often experimental, employ alternative grains, sugars, fruits, spices, hops and other atypical ingredients to produce a specialized flavour and aroma. Ingredients in specialty beers may include fruits, honey, hemp, maple syrup, green tea, chocolate, and coffee.

superior in some respects. For example, a molecule named resveratrol found in the skin of grapes, has gained much attention recently for its ability to protect arteries from cholesterol blockages. Research now shows, however, that the key component to this particular protection is the alcohol content itself, and is not specific to one type of beverage. Likewise, moderate alcohol consumption is being found to lower dementia risks and notably slow the progression of rheumatoid arthritis, because of its ability to reduce inflammation in the body, according to Dr. Axel Finckh at the University of Geneva.

Amazingly, beer is actually more nutrient-rich than wine, with preservative-free craft and micro versions being the least processed and most beneficial. Beer naturally contains plentiful amounts of soluble fibre, B vitamins (particularly folate from yeast extract, important for creating and maintaining new cells), and a broad range of antioxidants. And although “wine may contain more antioxidants (per serving) than beer, there is still controversy as to whether they are effectively absorbed by the body,” says Dr. Charlie Bamforth, from the University of California at Davis.

Beer is also one of the richest sources of the mineral silicon, since the entire husk of grain is used in its processing. For women, this factor is especially important. It has long been understood that increasing silicon in the diet helps counter the severe bone loss associated with osteoporosis, but what was not clear was whether it could be effectively absorbed by the body. “Now we have confirmed that beer is a readily bio-available source of silicon,” reports Dr. Jonathan Powell,

tion of excess calories that lead to the unhealthy condition. Listen to that wise person who once said, “everything in moderation.” If you are incorporating beer to take advantage of the health benefits, it’s sound advice to stick to a maximum of two regular strength glasses daily. Also, the frequency has been proven to be as relevant as the quantity, so don’t think you can save your allocation for an “intoxicating” weekend—that is called bingeing and a definite no-no!

Perhaps most important, supporting small, independent brewers who are producing and distributing their products in the community is the perfect way to demonstrate the *locavore* in you. We are all looking for ways to help our local community remain a strong, diverse, interesting area to live and visit; and the businesses that exist in these tough economic times need our patronage more than ever. For residents of the Niagara region looking to champion the “little guy,” this is both easy to accomplish, and easy on the conscience.

In addition to sourcing their beer ingredients locally when possible, these breweries are mindful to “complete the circle” by using whole-some menu ingredients found locally and supplied fresh. It’s a reciprocal relationship between brewery and community within this niche market that is genuinely important and can benefit both parties. The family-owned Taps Brewing Company is really proud to support the Niagara region and looks for inventive ways to make this happen. They take their involvement in the community very seriously because it provides a level of connectedness that has been lost in big business, and it is far too valuable a commodity to pass up.

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BEER STYLES 101

Ale



Brewed from malted barley using a top-fermenting brewers’ yeast. This yeast ferments the beer quickly, giving it a sweet, full-bodied and fruity taste. Most ales contain hops, which impart a bitter herbal flavour that helps to balance the sweetness of the malt and preserve the beer. Ales typically take three to four weeks to make, although some varieties can take as long as four months.

Lager



Lager is one of the two main types of beer; the other being ale. Traditionally, lager is cold stored (“lagered”) for at least three weeks before being served. It is a general term that includes several variations or styles, such as Pilsener, Vienna, and Märzen. A lager is fermented at a much lower temperature than ale, and uses a different yeast, which is bottom-fermenting.

Pilsner



Invented in Pilsen, Czech Republic, this specific type of lager has a mild maltiness combined with a crisp, clean hop character and golden colour. Pilsner’s taste ranges from mild to very hoppy.

Porter



Rich and nourishing, this is a heavier brew of ale, with just a hint of sweetness. This deliciously thick top-fermented ale ranges from medium to full in body. Robust porters are black in colour and have a sharp, sweet, roast malt flavour. Generally brewed with soft water, porter’s dark brown hue comes from roasting the barley before the brewing process begins.

Wheat Beer



Crisp, fresh, and light, wheat beer is brewed with a combination of malted barley and wheat. This produces a paler colour than most all-barley ales but is very full on flavour. Like ales, wheat beer is usually top-fermented, and can be cloudy and effervescent.

Stout



Stout is a dark beer using roasted malts or roast barley, and has a rich, pleasant, full-bodied character that can be nutty, caramel and chocolate-like. Smooth with low to moderate bitterness, stout can be sweet and rich, or dry, and was originally a variant of porter.

(Courtesy of ontariocraftbrewers.com)
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the beer hunter

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“Being a small, independent brewer allows us the flexibility to work on new beers and get direct feedback from our customers about them. We have a Growler Club where members get to try a new beer each month. This allows our brewmaster to try new recipes and our customers to let me know directly what they like,” says Eric Martin. You certainly won't find this level of commitment to your taste buds at a faceless, soul-free, mega-brewery.

It's this type of operational adaptability found in a smaller business model that can easily respond to what is distinctive and flavourful rather than just bowing to mass appeal. Craft brewers can quickly incorporate special ingredients that might be experimental or include an element to reflect the region where they are located. Local fruits, honey, hemp, maple syrup—any ingredient is possible to produce an exclusive, unexpected flavour or aroma. St. Catharines' Merchant Ale House, located in the heart of the city, offers a refreshing Strawberry Blonde Fruit Ale on tap year round, as well as a popular Headless Horseman Pumpkin Ale with cinnamon and nutmeg for an inspired seasonal flair.

Coupled with intriguing ingredients, craft breweries are building their brands with a tip of their hats to the local area. Niagara's Best has developed a great marketing angle by cleverly naming their brews with region-appropriate historic flair: General Brock, Daredevil, Border, Logger, and Drummond Hill, after the Battle of Lundy's Lane infamous haunted cemetery, all grace their wide beer selection. Making an effort to highlight where craft beers are produced can help boost the area as an elite destination for the followers of this developing trend.

With the Niagara region already highly regarded as a food and wine hot spot, it makes sense to play our strong suit and market a locale that boasts desirable educational programs entwined with a total epicurean lifestyle. Continuing to attract connoisseurs and enthusiasts who appreciate the finer things in life will be a vital component to our region's ongoing success.

Happily, I now realize that when it comes to beer, I have been drunk with my own ignorance and under the influence of a sad lack of knowledge.

So, next time, raise a pint for me too!

I'll take a creamy, smooth pale ale with just a hint of citrus. . .

Cheers! NM

Christine Darragh is a Niagara based writer and researcher who contributes to various magazines and publications. With over 10 years of business/corporate writing experience, she is thankful the English degree proved worthwhile and now joyfully writes about what truly interests her.

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