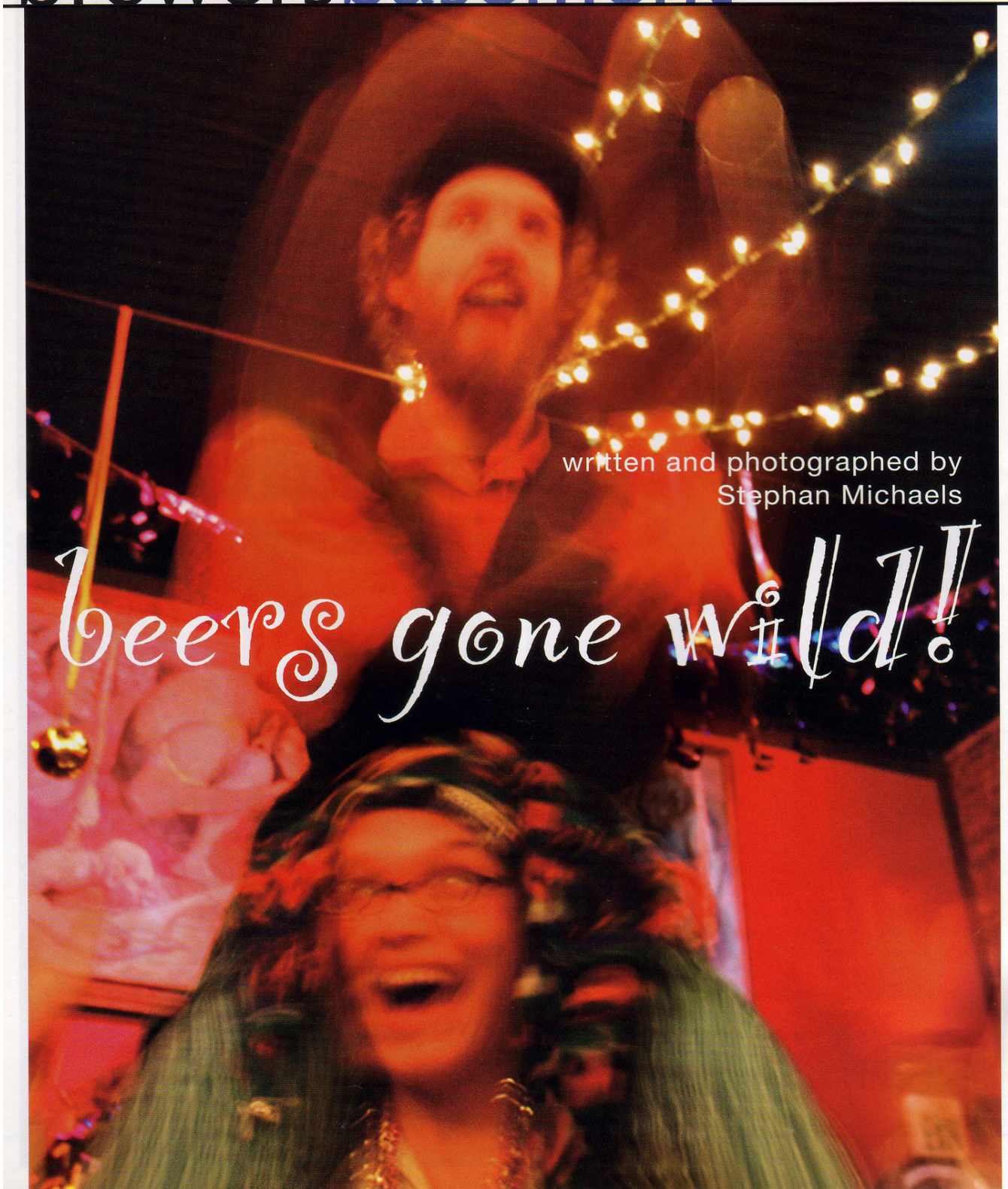


brewersbasement

written and photographed by
Stephan Michaels

beers gone wild!!



Trying to conduct a sit down interview with the three owners of Water Street Brewing and Ale House in Port Townsend, Washington, is like a zany scene from an old comedy film. They poke fun at one another, spontaneously interrupt each other, and even finish each other's sentences. About ten minutes into it, my micro-cassette recorder is suddenly held aloft and passed around in a game of keep-away. By the time I finally retrieve the recorder, my notepad is missing. If I didn't know better, I'd swear I was sitting in the back of the brewpub with Groucho, Chico, and Harpo, and not Mark Burr, Nina Law, and Skip Madsen.

But why not clown around a little? The three business partners are old friends celebrating their fifth year of craft brewing at the spacious brewpub, located where Port Townsend's near-legendary Town Tavern was once housed.

You might even recognize this colorful pub from the 1982 film *An Officer and A Gentleman*. Filmed in Port Townsend, many scenes were shot at the Town Tavern and the spot remains a sentimental landmark. Burr says they took that legacy to heart when they opened their doors in 2004.

"Our whole goal was to establish an extended living room for the people of Port Townsend. From the very beginning," he remembers, "we got a great response because we focused on the town, not on the tourists."

The brewpub hit a high watermark its second year when they entered Madsen's high-octane creation, Big Phatty Imperial Red Ale, in the 2006 World Beer Cup in Seattle.

"It's a fairly new style in the brewing world," says the shaggy-haired Madsen, who had already earned himself a reputation as a quality brewer at Boundary Bay Brewery and Bistro in Bellingham. Also known as "The Wookie," because locals say he resembles Chewbacca from Star Wars, Madsen reminisces, "When I heard that Imperial Red was a new category, I thought I'd enter mine and define the style. It's a stronger, hoppier version of our Panama Red."

"The malts I used were Munich and Vienna body malts and some dark crystal malts," he reveals. "I also used light crystal Carastan malt and a variation of Simcoe, Centennial, and Amarillo hops. I put hops in the mash tun, hops in the kettle, and dry hopped it."

Weighing in at 8.5 percent ABV, the Big Phatty was runner up in its class and brought home a silver medal to Port Townsend.

Strange Days

Now, as winter sets in and life slows down in this sleepy Victorian seaport town, the rambunctious trio are plotting the celebration of yet another milestone: their fifth annual Strange Brewfest on January 24th and 25th.

If Water Street can be considered a kind of extended living room, Burr says to think of the Strange Brewfest as "an extended romper room."

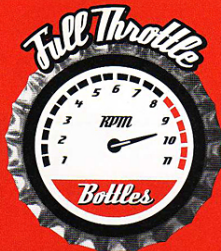
According to Nina Law, the beer festival was conceived to foster an atmosphere of fun and also to stimulate the local economy in the rainy off-season. "It's about beer; it's about community; it's about being a little off the wall and unpredictable." Indeed, there's nothing like it on the entire Olympic Peninsula. Strange Brew has the feel of a wild "under the big top" beer carnival, replete with jugglers, musicians, oyster shuckers, fire dancers, hockey shot and dunking contests, and, oh yeah, ridiculous quantities of fresh craft brews on tap.

It's also an unusual event by contrast to most Northwest beer festivals, in that brewers aren't showcasing their normal wares. Instead, Law says that brewers are encouraged to concoct extreme brews that reflect their individual ingenuities. "It creates an element of competition among the brewers," she says. "They're creating crazy, delicious beers that you're not going to find anywhere else. It gives them the chance to be creative and it gives everybody the chance to taste some really unique stuff."

Try to pace yourself, folks, the number of brewers lined up to showcase their freestyle foamy creations is downright staggering. This January, more than 40 brewers are anticipated to set up their handles on the pier.

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Mad Science meets Micro-brewing

Top honors are decided by public ballot for the most delightfully uncanny suds. There's a People's Choice Award and the highly coveted Strange Brew Award, which was bestowed last year to Rich Dirk of Elk Head Brewing in Buckley, Washington.

"That fest is right up our alley," confesses the brewer, who says his recipes tend to skew toward the peculiar anyway. "It's off the wall beers and off the wall people."

The brew that pulled the blue ribbon was the Elk Dandy, made with dandelion, ginger, ginseng, and honey.

"It's basically a barleywine style recipe," says Dirk. "The dandelion flowers go right into the last part of the boiling process. I add the ginger, the ginseng, and honey all into the boil." Then he lets it ferment.

Are we talking heavy fuel? "Yeh," he bellows, "it's about ten percent!"

This effort was Dirk's encore to the equally potent Royal Black that he introduced the previous year. "It's actually like an imperial stout recipe, but a concentrated version. I use locally dark roasted coffee right before I turn the kettle off. And I use Sumac dark honey from Yakima in the boil. Then it sits on vanilla beans and oak chips in the finishing tank for at least a month."

Tony Savoy, head brewer at Flyer's Restaurant and Brewery in Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island, brought home the People's Choice in 2007 and again in 2008. Savoy says he'll be back in January, lauding Strange Brew as a welcome respite from the norm.

"I think everybody goes there with a different mentality," he notes. "It's a brewer's brew fest. You can hang out and actually drink the beer and talk to the people brewing it and enjoy yourself. It's not as stuffy as some of the other brew fests."

Last year, to warm the chilly cockles of those attending the mid-winter outdoor event, Savoy dreamed up a Crushed Red Pepper Porter.

"We took our regular Pace Maker Porter and instead of dry hopping," he explains, "I used the same hop sack that I would normally put in a keg, but I added some crushed red pepper to spice it up. I put it on for about three days before it went to the festival. It was pretty warm," he laughs.

Another craft brew alchemist who gladly embraces the challenge to outdo himself is Drew Cluley, head brewer of Pike Brewing Co. in Seattle. The last couple of years, Cluley has devised a piquant Raspberry Stout for the weekend.

"We use a raspberry gueuze (a Belgium ale) and we spike our XXXXX Stout with it," he reveals. "They're two great flavors that go together."

"The key to the stout," Cluley continues, "is that it's a big hoppy Northwest—almost imperial—stout. Comes in at about seven percent alcohol, 65 IBUs of bitterness. It's a generally rich and thick and satisfying stout." The stout itself is only made with malt, hops, water, and yeast.

For this upcoming fest, Cluley plans to bring what he's dubbed Drew's Pineapple IPA.

"It will be hoppy and citrusy, with a refreshingly fruity finish. I'll take pineapple chunks and puree them and add it to the secondary tank," he explains. "What we'll do is take our regular IPA, transfer it into kegs and add the pineapple slurry and let it age for seven to ten days. We'll transfer it back into clean kegs, filtering out the pineapple slurry, leaving the juiced essence of the pineapple. Then we'll carbonate it in the kegs."

And, of course, Water Street's Madsen will offer up a couple of his own diabolic boils.

"I have a sour brown ale that I call Downtown Sour Brown. It's a new brew for me this year," he says coyly. "It's brewed with wild Belgium yeast, giving it a Belgium sour character."

"Then I'll probably do a Chocolate Oatmeal Stout," muses the master of strange brew. "I use ten pounds of chocolate and put that in the whirlpool after boiling. The oatmeal goes in with the grains in the mash tun. I just melt the chocolate into the beer, then cool it down and ferment it. That one's about 7.5 percent."

Wait a minute. Beers made with ginseng, dandelions, chocolate, lambic ale, wild yeast, raspberry, vanilla beans, red pepper, and pineapple? That sounds like certifiably insane fun. Color me there, again!

And look for the Beer Northwest booth, too. They'll be there under the big top with a strange brew in one hand and some crazy swag in the other.

Who knows? After knocking back a high-octane pint or two, perhaps we can persuade fearless publisher Flynn to pull on an old Victorian era one-piece bathing suit, and brave the dunking tank.

Now that would be a good time!

• • •

In a day and age where very little lives up to its hype, **Stephan Michaels** winks a smile to anyone attending the Strange Brewfest for the very first time!

LAUGHING DOG AHEAD OF THE PACK

WHO SAYS IPA
HAS TO BE PALE



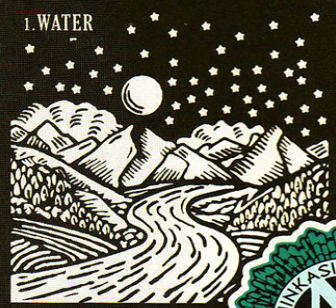
DOGZILLA




BLACK IPA

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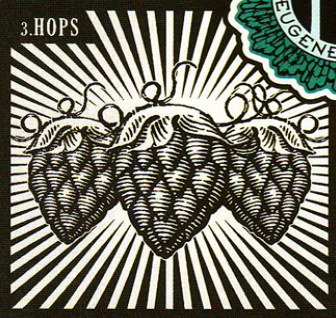
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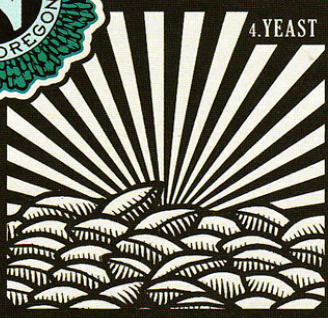
2. MALT



3. HOPS



4. YEAST



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