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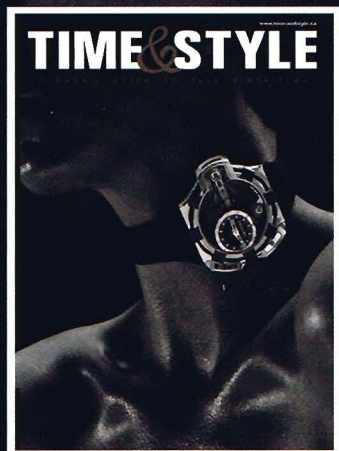
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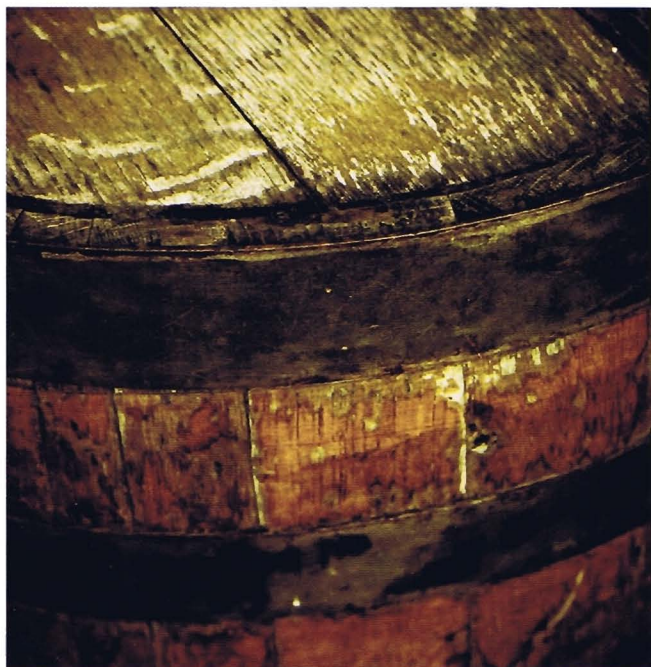
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INSIDE:
HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT WATCH

Cloudy With a Chance of Delicious: Cask Ale

An ice-cold beer on a hot summer day is a match made in heaven, but winter is a great time for hopheads, too. Our pick when the weather turns cold? Cask ale. JIL MCINTOSH



British pubs have served cask-conditioned ale since pretty much the dawn of time, but North Americans are finally getting in on the secret. It starts out pretty much the same as any beer: water, malted grain, hops and yeast. After fermenting, most mainstream beers are then filtered, pasteurized and bottled. What makes cask ale different is that it undergoes a secondary fermentation, isn't processed or filtered, and is served directly from the cask, often closer to room temperature. It's in this second step that a skillful brewmaster makes his mark on the beer.

At Dix BBQ & Brewery in downtown Vancouver, already a destination on the beer traveler's agenda for its ultra-hoppy India Pale Ale, brewer Derrick Franche opens one of his casks for fans every Thursday.

"After the primary fermentation, you pitch more sugar and yeast into it," he says. "The sugar's a food source for the yeast, but what you use also determines the taste. Sometimes it's corn sugar, or sometimes I'll use maple sugar to prime a cask for a certain style of beer. This is also an opportune time to add more hops. The tank is cooler, and it's a green, resinous, flowery flavour. It goes into a cask and is kept at a temperature where the yeast is comfortable, usually around 20°C, and it starts to ferment, anywhere from one to three weeks. It's a double-fermented, hoppier, less-carbonated brew."

Naturally-carbonated and with yeast still in the cask, these ales are also called "live beers." The yeast falls to the bottom as sediment, but since the beer isn't filtered, it isn't always entirely clear. "A cloudy beer will have more flavour," Franche says. "It's just ripe with all sorts of beer flavours that are in there. You can argue that someone who doesn't like cloudy beer may not like beer at all."

Ales are the most common candidates for cask conditioning, since they tend to taste best when cool rather than ice-cold, but just about anything can go through the process. Franche often casks fruit beers, lagers and wheat beers and serves them cold for summer, or darker brews such as stout. Beer strength is also at the discretion of the brewer. It's possible to produce anything from a tippie you could give to your little sister right up to double-digits, but the range is generally between five and nine percent.

The stronger versions work best in winter: combine the yeasty goodness, the higher alcohol, and the cool serving temperature and you've got a rich, chewy brew that'll drive the cold out of your bones faster than a cup of coffee and an electric blanket.

If there's anything wrong with cask-conditioned beer, it's that it's usually served close to where it's made—and that means it may be hard for some beer lovers to find. But balance that with the unmistakable signature of the brewer as he crafts each unique brew by hand. If you're happy popping the top off a mass-produced beer that tastes exactly the same whether you're in Nunavut, Newfoundland or Nanaimo, you're on your own. If you want a beer that's still alive when it's in your glass, then come and sit with us.

Cask Ale at a Bar Near You

HALIFAX: The Henry House, 1222 Barrington, (902) 423-5660

MONTREAL: L'Amère à Boire, 2049 Rue St. Denis, (514) 282-7448

OTTAWA: The Arrow & Loon, 99 5th Ave., (613) 237-0448

TORONTO: C'est What, 67 Front St. E, (416) 867-9499

CALGARY: Wild Rose Taproom, #2 - 4580 Quesnay Wood Drive SW, (403) 720-2733

VANCOUVER: Dix BBQ & Brewery, 871 Beatty Street, (604) 682-2739



Another Beer for the Dark Days: Innis & Gunn

Back in 2002, a Scottish brewer named Dougal Sharp discovered by accident that maturing beer in oak whisky barrels improves its flavour immensely. The latest offering from his new brewery, Innis & Gunn, is a triple-matured beer with notes of oak, malt and honey. It's hearty, complex and strong, a perfect combination for making the winter bearable.