

Leigh's FAVOURITE BEERS of 2017



By Leigh Norwood (Owner – Favourite Beers, 105 Hewlett Road, Cheltenham)

It has been another amazing year in the world of beer, with some cracking new breweries opening all over the world and the experimental world of craft beer surging ahead in leaps and bounds. Sour beers, Farmhouse Ales and hazy New England IPAs seem to have been the major 'in' styles with experiments in all sorts of adjuncts once again being prevalent.

On reviewing the beers that I have found so impressive this year, I decided to make two changes to this annual list – firstly I have upped it to a top 12 instead of a top 10 as I just couldn't decide on two of the beers to drop, I have also decided to include foreign beers for the first time, as it was some of these that really impressed me. As with previous years I have once again limited the list to just one beer from each brewery, otherwise there was a real danger of having just a few breweries dominate the entire list – Where deserved, I have however mentioned other notable brews for each entry. I have once again added RateBeer and Untappd scores for each of the beers so that you can see what other drinkers make of them comparatively. All the beers on the lists have appeared in the shop for the first time this year in canned or bottled form although some may have been in production prior to 2017. I did think about adding some of the beers that we have just had on keg but decided against it – instead I have also listed my top 12 keg beers of the year (that we have poured) at the bottom of the list.

As you will see as you work through the list, the beers that have the 'Wow' factor for me these days pretty much need to be of fairly high strength and have loads of flavour and complexity. In fact, as a generalisation, all the beers in this list fit into one of just two categories – strong, dark, generally sweet, imperial stouts and porters or strong IPAs, Double IPAs or Triple IPAs! I honestly do highly rate beers in other styles, good German lagers, Belgian lambics and farmhouse beers, even some relatively low ABV traditional British beers, it's just that in the past 12 months, no new beers in these styles have really stood out for me.

So here it is, my choice of the top 12 bottled (and canned) beers of 2017:

1 - DEYA Brewing Company (Collaboration with Verdant Brewing Co.) – High Planes Drifter – (can) 8.0%
(RateBeer: 98/93) (Untappd: 4.35)

Any one of the beers in my top 5 would have been well deserving of this year's number 1 slot, but I have decided to stick local and go with my initial gut feeling when first tasting this beer back in February – This is my entry from my Untappd check-in at the time: "Awesome - tropical fruit smoothie at 8%. Thick with an Intense aroma and lovely smooth sweet taste. Beer of the year?". This has meant that for the remainder of 2017, when I have come across other superb beers, I have generally been asking myself is this beer better than 'High Planes Drifter'?

Back in February I had just about heard of Verdant Brewing Co. - I knew they came from the South West, but I knew little about them and had not then tasted any of their beers. I knew a lot more about DEYA



having followed the blossoming of this wonderful brewery from the very early experimental stages as a gypsy brewer, through the fitting of their brew house and the development of a superb range of beers over their first 12 months. I also knew they could brew a good DIPA after the brilliant collaboration brew that was created on their kit in collaboration with Gloucester and Prescott breweries for the inaugural Cheltenham Beer Week (which was incidentally my beer of the year for 2016).

This beer however was something else! Here was a very young brewery from my home town producing one of the most amazing beers I had ever tasted – it reminded me of the first time I tried Alchemist's infamous 'Heady Topper' a few years back - over loading my senses with the most intense aromas and tastes of sweet, ripe tropical fruits all presented via an incredible smooth, creamy glassful of nectar. Was it as good as Heady Topper or any of the Cloudwater v series of DIPAs (v3 and v9 particularly)? Was it better than the other incredible NE style DIPAs that have followed it this year (some of which feature in this top 12)? Without a side-by-side comparison, it is almost impossible to tell, but I do know that I wasn't the only one in Cheltenham to have been amazed by this beer and I also know that it, along with some of the other incredible juice bombs that DEYA have carried on producing this year has re-set the palates of many local beer drinkers and inspired a mini-revolution in turning people on to good beer. Long may their success continue.

- Honourable mentions – Waterfall, Sunset Dreaming, Into the Haze

2 - Kees – Barrel Aged Caramel Fudge Stout – 12.0%

(RateBeer: 100/95) (Untappd: 4.27)

Kees Bubberman is one of The Netherlands most acclaimed brewers, as a homebrewer he won every competition going and after he joined the Emelisse Brewery as brewmaster in 2007 they went from strength to strength being included in Ratebeer's 'Worlds Top 100 Breweries 2014'. In 2015 he launched his own brewery after a successful crowd-funding campaign and has been brewing some outstanding beers ever since. I have dabbled with a few Kees beers in the shop in the last couple of years, but it was on a trip to Leeds back in November that I first got to try this beauty where it was on keg alongside an impressive array of other great beers at North Bar. As soon as I returned from my trip I was hunting down the lists of my wholesalers trying to secure some bottles for the shop (unfortunately I only managed to nab 12 bottles!).



At 12.0% abv it is obviously not for the fainthearted, it had brilliant aromas of milk chocolate, and caramel fudge with hints of bourbon, vanilla, dark fruits and nuts. The taste pretty much followed suit, being quite sweet and full bodied with a lovely thick chewy character. The body was so smooth and the flavours so clean and rich that although you could taste the alcohol it didn't get in the way as it does on some beers of this strength. A perfect beer for the end of the day – I have one reserved for Christmas!

- Honourable mentions – The non-BA version of this beer is very good as is the Mosaic Hop Explosion.

3 – Cloudwater (Collaboration with The Veil)– Chubbles 10.0%

(RateBeer 100/99) (Untappd: 4.4)

There do seem to have been a fair number of impressive Triple IPAs around this year, and many of them have been collaboration brews between breweries who have had successful Double/Imperial IPAs – the thought process probably being – “Well, why don’t we push it to the next level – higher strength, more hops, more malt etc.”. Now many of you will know all about the impressive DIPAs that have been coming out from Manchester’s Cloudwater brewery over the last couple of years, but Veil Brewing company based in Richmond, Virginia had also been building a bit of a reputation on the other side of the pond for these impressive beers.



Veil brewer and co-founder Matt Tarpey is a veteran of The Alchemist and Hill Farmstead breweries in Vermont and he also spent a few weeks with Jean Van Roy, brewmaster of Brasserie Cantillon in Brussels, and learned a lot about lambic brewing during his time there – in fact the name of his brewery comes from his time there and is a homage to the ‘veil’ of proteins that make up the membrane on top of spontaneously fermented beers

and wines.

When brewers of such pedigree come together, you should really expect something special – and that is just what we got with this beer, which was in fact a replication of a brew first created in the USA, but replicated at a slightly lower strength in Manchester this year.

Very typical of the New England style of pale beers it was very cloudy and quite a dark golden colour. The aroma was the first thing to amaze you though - so intense with crazy amounts of mango, pineapple and loads of other ripe tropical/citrus fruits. The medium sweet taste followed the aroma with loads of smooth fruits – all carried by an oh-so-smooth body with great texture and mouthfeel – like other well-made beers in this style it really didn’t drink to its strength – although you could tell it was a strong beer, you would never have chalked it up at 10% – absolutely delicious!

- Honourable mentions – DIPA v11, DIPA v13, NW DIPA Citra, Imaginary Greenscapes

4 – Arbor Ales – Goo Goo G’Joob (2017 version) – 12.8%

(RateBeer 99/84) (Untappd: 4.08)

OK – Not strictly the first time that we have had a beer with this name from Arbor Ales in the shop as it was originally released back in 2012 to celebrate the 5th anniversary of the brewery – that version had a very different bottle design and was a mere 11.0% abv – so I think I am justified with including it here. Five years on and this maple syrup infused imperial stout was re-brewed for the 10th Anniversary celebrations of the brewery, earlier this year – I first tried this iteration in its cask form at this year’s Bristol Beer festival back in March, on the same day that I paid my first ever visit to Arbor Ales. Whilst chatting to the lovely Arbor people in the office before I went to the festival, I noticed a bottle on the side and asked when it would be available – sadly, it was conditioning very slowly in the bottle version and it proved to be several months until it finally made it onto our shelves – but it was worth the wait.



Warning – for a 12.8% beer, this is dangerously drinkable! It Poured very black with a thin tan head and nice carbonation. The aroma was startling – loads of sweet black treacle, chocolate, dark roast malts,

7 – Siren Craft Brew (Original collaboration with To Øl)– The Kentucky Tickle Monster 16.3% IPA
(RateBeer 88/48) (Untappd: 4.19)



Now, I must admit I do like strong beers (OK – for anyone that know me, I’m stating the bleeding obvious now), but I am sometimes put off the super strong ones when the alcohol becomes too much of a major influence in the taste and aroma of the beer. As such I was a bit sceptical when I first opened this Bourbon Barrel aged version of the awesome Tickle Monster Triple IPA brewed last year in collaboration with To Øl. I needn’t have been worried though - having been squirrelled away in those lovely wooden containers for a year, the complexities of this beer are numerous – some subtle, some not so subtle. The original beer was already aged on cedar wood with added mango, so the mixed wood impacts provide for some very interesting characteristics.

On pouring you immediately notice the Bourbon impact on the aroma with all the boozy characteristics that it brings with it. There were also lots of woody notes, vanilla, caramel and a hint of smokiness. The mango characteristics present on the original beer had all but disappeared on the aroma but there was a hint of sticky marmalade and pine. The taste did not hide the alcohol, but it didn’t burn as may be expected with this strength. The bourbon was up-front, and the sweetness of the malts was apparent from the first sip with big caramel, fudge and syrupy molasses. The fruity mango came through nicely with other citrus fruits and vanilla and there was a nice long bitter sweet finish –

gorgeous!

- Honourable mentions – Project Barista Turkish, Comfortable Silence

8 – Good Chemistry – Kokomo Weekend – 7.0%
(RateBeer N/A) (Untappd: 3.92)

I started the year not really knowing a lot about this wonderful Bristol Brewery other than the fact that they existed. Then back in February I was contacted by the irrepressible Sam Curley who I had previously met when he was Sales Manager at Lost and Grounded – he had recently joined the Good Chemistry team and dropped some samples into the shop, all of which were very good beers. I then had the opportunity to visit the brewery as part of the East Bristol Brewery Trail at the end of April (If you haven’t been to one of these, you really should get along – Arbor, Moor, LHG, Dawkins and Good Chemistry – all within an easy walk) where I tasted this fantastic beer for the first time. It is one of the few beers that we have since featured on the keg bar at the shop more than once.

The beer had a hazy golden body with refreshing tropical fruit aromas to the fore. I would liken the taste to drinking a liquid version of a nicely put together orange marmalade with some solid malt sweetness, big orange citrus notes and a hint of spice with a fairly long bittersweet finish. It drinks quite lightly for its strength and I seem to remember that my first pint was gone very swiftly! We have had this beer in bottle on and off over the last year and hopefully it will become a regular fixture for the brewery going forward.



A little bit about the GC bottles – they are big 660ml sizes (hence a bit dearer than some) with truly inspirational graphics on the artwork depicting a percentage scale for each beer the amount of Hoppiness, Maltiness, Bitterness, Sweetness and Body. This works incredibly well when you see a row of the different beers lined up on the shelves. If you came along and met Sam, Bob and Kelly at the ‘Meet The Brewer’ double header we held with Left Handed Giant for our Birthday week, you will know that these guys are some of the nicest people you will meet in the beer industry – long may they continue brewing great beers.

- Honourable mentions – Becoming North, Advent Horizon

9 – Beavertown (Collaboration with Cigar City) – Paleo Pinhead – 9.0% (Can)

(RateBeer 95/68) (Untappd: 4.15)

For someone who isn't fond of coconut (particularly in its desiccated form) I do seem to have a massive fondness for beers that have used coconut as an adjunct in the brewing process, particularly the dark ones (although there have been a few IPAs appearing with coconut this year). My first experience was with Maui Brewing's coconut porter some years back and I was entranced by the wonderful roasted coconut aroma and silky feel of the beer. So, I was pretty excited to learn that the brewers at Beavertown had teamed up with Wayne Wambles of Florida's Cigar City Brewing to produce an Imperial version of a coconut porter infused not only with coconut, but with cacao as well. The aim of the brew was to link London with Florida, Porter as the beer most identifiable with the British Capital being merged with the tropical tastes of Tampa.



The beer was, as you would expect, very dark on pouring with a thin tan head. The aromas were a mixture of milk chocolate, vanilla, roasted nuts and dried fruits. On tasting, the flavours were a combination of caramel, coconut, sweet milk chocolate and vanilla, but it slipped down so smoothly – all very decadent.

Note: Look out next year for a version of this beer currently being aged in Rum Barrels for even more of a tropical dimension!

- Honourable mentions: Humuloid

10 – Lervig – Tasty Juice – 6.0%

(RateBeer 99/99) (Untappd: 4.0)

This is probably the beer that started my love affair with Scandinavian beers earlier on this year. OK, we have had a smattering of Mikkeller, Nøgne O and a couple of others in the shop for a few years now, but the quality of beers coming out of Denmark, Norway and Sweden in 2017 has been incredible and together with the fact that these beers have been a bit easier (and cheaper) to get hold of this year led me to creating our very own ‘Scandinavian Wall of Beer’.

This beer was inspired by a US trip that the Lervig brewers made to Boston last year, so it's no surprise that it's very much in the style of the New England IPAs. It poured a hazy yellow with a fruity, resinous hoppy nose of grapefruit, mango and pine. It had pretty low bitterness and a lovely smooth, silky mouthfeel that transposed the fruity flavours of



mango, passionfruit, orange and pineapple. There was some nice background sweetness but it was never cloying. Bitterness became more pronounced on a slightly drying finish.

Expect a lot more great beers from these guys in 2018 as they have found a great route to market in the UK now through wholesalers Cave Direct for bottles, cans and kegs – we have featured five superb Lervig beers on our keg bar this year.

- Honourable mentions – Socks N’ Sandals, Supersonic

11 – Garage (Collaboration with Wild Beer) – Snake Fear – 8.0%

(RateBeer 94/71) (Untappd: 3.84)

When we first opened in 2010 I was often asked whether we had any Spanish beers in the shop and I did source a few from the likes of Alhambra and Estrella for a few customers; they tended to be OK lagers, but nothing to rave about. How times have changed – in the last few years well over 100 small craft breweries have started up across the Iberian peninsular with Catalonia and particularly its capital Barcelona very much leading the way. One Barcelona brewpub that has been at the forefront in recent times is Garage Beer Co. based in the Eixample district about a 15-minute walk from the end of La Ramblas.



We have managed to source a number of beers from Garage this year, but it was two of their collaborations, one with New York’s Other Half and this one with Wild Beer that really caught my attention. Wild Beer are of course no strangers to collaborative beers having been a mainstay of the Rainbow Project beers since 2014.

The beer featuring an unusual image of a silver duck on the can (packaging design is something Garage are very good at) is an 8%, hopped up, double IPA - very much in the New England style but with a few notable taste differences. It poured very hazy like other NE DIPAs but the aroma was far more resinous with sticky, fruity, dank hop characteristics. The taste gave more resinous, bitter-sweet fruity notes and although fairly smooth it had a reasonable bitter characteristic to cut through the sweetness and boozy notes and to dry out the palate. A good balanced DIPA.

- Honourable mentions – More Green, Soup

12 - To Øl – Jule Maelk Rhum Edition – 15.0%

(RateBeer 99/90) (Untappd: 4.34)

Having expanded our range of Scandinavian beers this year it gave me the chance to try a fair number of more unusual specialist winter/Christmas specials from overseas – we had several from Denmark and Norway and they have been incredibly popular, but a couple of them really stood out. One of these was Lervig’s Christmas Shake which we had in bottles and keg, but the one that really blew me away was this little beauty from the fantastic To Øl gypsy brewers.

They took their traditional Christmas Beer (and the strongest beer they currently brew – the Jule Maelk Imperial milk stout) and matured it with Rum soaked Oak chips. This has resulted in one of the most powerful milk stouts I have ever come across. The aroma was quite boozy with notes of sweet roasted malts, caramel, dried dark fruits and chocolate. The rum came



through in the taste, riding on the back of a sweet hit of gooey rich caramel and raisins. Surprisingly, there was quite a dry roasty, boozy finish which I hadn't expected – Overall, a sweet, gorgeous, complex and warming beer. I bet this one goes down well in Denmark on a cold winters night!

- Honourable mentions – By Udder Means, Long Time No See

Well, there you have it – 12 beers that show just how vibrant the worldwide beer industry is at the current time. Hopefully you will have managed to try some of these beers for yourselves over the past year, if not, some of them are still available to buy in the shop and I can guarantee that you will not be disappointed.

And finally – here is my list of the top 12 Keg beers that we have on this year:

1. Northern Monk – Sticky Toffee Strannik (10% Russian Imperial Stout)
2. DEYA – Waterfall (8.8% DIPA)
3. Cloudwater DIPA v13 (9.0% DIPA)
4. Augustiner Hell (5.2% Helles Lager)
5. Westmalle Dubbel (7.0% Belgian Trappist Dark ale)
6. Track Sonoma (3.8% Pale Ale)
7. Buxton – Guatemalan Coffee Extra Porter (7.4% Porter)
8. Lervig/Cloudwater – There's a Beer In My Fridge (7.2% Rye IPA)
9. Arbor Ale – Super Yakima (9.5% DIPA)
10. Verhaeghe – Duchesse De Bourgogne (6.2% Flemish Sour brown)
11. Alphabet – Juice Springsteen (4.5% APA)
12. Garage/Other Half – More Green (8.0% DIPA)