

Follow your palate at the 22nd Mondial de la Bière International fest offers 475 beers, half of them brand-new

Text and photos by Jeff Heinrich

Posted: Sunday, June 14, 2015



Lining up for tasting glass and a booklet of coupons

A beer festival isn't like a wine show; a beer fest is louder, younger, more playful, more rock-'n-roll. Crowds don't burst into spontaneous, rolling chants at a wine show. But one thing the two activities do have in common is professional bonhomie, a spirit of friendly rivalry but also mutual support among the people who craft the stuff we drink.

“Avez-vous goûté à la bière aux camerises?” a bearded fellow at the Benelux brewpub's stand asked me Saturday at Le Mondial de la Bière, now in its 22nd edition

at the Palais des Congrès. He was talking about tasting something hyperlocal – a wheat beer flavoured with haskap berries, which are like blueberries.

I asked him if he had any. He shook his head and pointed me to another stand, a small Gaspé microbrewery called La Fabrique that's a newcomer to the fest. “You'd have to go all the way to Matane to try it,” the Benelux server said. “They have it on tap right over there.” And sure enough, they did, and it was delicious.

“We know a guy who grows this fruit who wanted to make it into wine,” the coop's brewmaster and co-founder, Jean-Pierre Boutin, told me. “We said, ‘Why not make into a beer?’ So we did.” And they called it La Simonne. It's a wheat beer flavoured with the haskap berry and aged in cabernet-sauvignon casks.



La Fabrique's brewmaster draws some fruit beer

Unusual, but not unique. The Mondial is full of surprises like that, from hard-to-find foreign beers in fancy bottles to locally brewed variations of European styles on draft. Use your foldout guide to track down the newest brews (highlighted in blue), listen to the advice freely given around you, and discover what pleases your palate.

I'm partial to the new microbrews of Italy and the lagers of the Czech Republic from travels there, and seek those out first. But you may prefer the heavily hopped India Pale Ales of New England and California, or the high-alcohol barley wines of Brazil and Mexico, or some of Quebec's mead wines. One thing leads to another.



inside the big hall at the Palais des Congrès

At the kiosk of Rosemont's La Succursale brewpub, I noticed the beer list had a decidedly Germano-Slavic flavour. There was a Düsseldorf-style altbier, a couple of Weißbier (wheat beers), a Czech pilsner, a Grätzer. What's a Grätzer? "It's actually a Polish style," the server said. "Sort of a smoked beer." I pushed my stein forward and gestured to the tap. "Sorry, we're out," he said. "Try Benelux – they have one."

On my way, I lined up at the Brasserie Dunham stand for some Eastern Townships honey beer. I wanted the one flavoured with propolis, a piney resin that bees collect for their hives. The keg was empty, however, so I got the brewery's Saison Fleurs, a honey-and-elderberry beer, quite subtle and lovely.



Le Saint-Bock's Francis Melançon serves some prize-winning milk stout

Le Saint-Bock is a brewpub on rue St-Denis, not far from where I live in the Plateau Mont-Royal. At their stand, I was surprised to see two kinds of milk stout, a mouth-coating style of dark beer brewed with lactose. I first discovered milk stout (in bottle) in 1998 on a trip to Durban, South Africa. Le Saint-Bock's is called Malédiction.

The higher-alcohol version (9.2%), Double Malédiction, brewed at Les Brasseurs du Monde in Saint-Hyacinthe, won a platinum medal at this year's fest.

Good timing: It'll be available in dépanneurs next week in 500-ml bottles, marking Le Saint-Bock's first foray into commercial bottling.



Bottle-sampling at the VIP bar

I wound up the afternoon kibbitzing and tasting at the festival's VIP bar, reconnecting with some Italian microbreweries I first got to know at last year's fest and subsequently on a trip to Rome. Appropriately enough, all these beer producers begin with the letter B: Baladin, Birranova and Brùton.

My pick of the bunch was something new from Brùton, a saison-style ale called Abiura. Cloudy and tangy, it reminded me a bit of Cooper's Sparkling Ale from



Australia, minus the fizz and with a slightly higher alcohol count (6.5%). As refreshing as its colourful label, Abiura is brewed in sunny Tuscany.

There's still one more day left at the Mondial de la Bière. If you haven't already, head on down and make some discoveries of your own.

The 22nd edition of Le Mondial de la Bière began Wednesday and continues through Sunday at the Palais des Congrès in downtown Montreal. 523 products (beers, meads, ciders and more), including 475 beers; 85 breweries, including 40 microbreweries from Quebec; 226 new beers. Free admission. Coupons are \$1 each; 2 to 8 coupons per 2-ounce tasting. Reusable tasting cups are \$5 (plastic) or \$10 (glass stein). More info: www.festivalmondialbiere.qc.ca

© Jeff Heinrich

