

Beyond the India Pale Ale

by Mirella Amato

"What's amazing to me is that San Diego and this whole area, Southern California, less than ten years ago was considered an absolute wasteland, and Northern California was what it was all about. Southern California was way behind and then suddenly: BOOM!"

These are the words of renowned Brooklyn Brewery brewmaster, Garrett Oliver, who was visiting San Diego for the Craft Brewers' Conference last



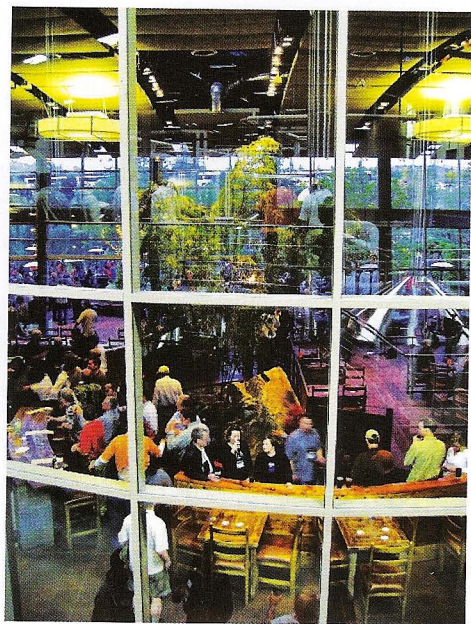
welcome to the home
of the double IPA and the
lupulin threshold shift

April. The San Diego brewing scene is definitely in full swing. The past few years have seen a steady increase in the number of award-winning breweries in the area, and the city is now chock-full of beer destinations.

The western coast of the United States, in general, is known for producing IPAs that make aggressive use of the distinctively flavoured hops that grow in the Pacific North-West. Vinnie Cilurzo, from Russian River Brewing Co. in Santa Rosa (up the coast), has this distinction to make about IPAs in the San

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Stone Brewing's stunning World Bistro

Diego area, "The North-West gets a lot of credit for making really hoppy beers, but I think that when you taste them head to head you'll find that in general, California's beers (IPA-wise) are hoppier." Cilurzo is credited with brewing the first ever double IPA in the mid-nineties, when he was the brewmaster at Blind Pig Brewing, just north of San Diego. Cilurzo also coined the phrase "lupulin threshold shift", to describe the fact that, in addition to their passion for hops, local drinkers have developed a higher tolerance for bitterness in their beer.

Arrogant Bastard Ale: this is an aggressive beer

Armed with this information, I decided to take the time to discover these 'hoppier' local beers while attending the Craft Brewers' Conference. My adventure began at the conference's welcome reception, held at **Stone Brewing** the first night. The new, 55,000 square-foot, Stone Brewing facility is stunning. The brewery and World Bistro are spacious with welcoming natural light. Gargoyle designs are embedded directly into the wall and the vast gardens are beautifully landscaped. Stone is perhaps best known for its Arrogant Bastard ale, whose label proudly proclaims: This is an aggressive beer.

Arrogant Bastard was available that night in oak-aged form, adding vanilla and brown sugar notes to this richly hopped ale. I also sampled a Pale Ale on cask, as well as Stone Levitation. Although all of these beers had a bold hops presence, each one presented a distinctive flavour profile, demonstrating that the world of well-hopped San Diego beers is full of nuances. Just as I was beginning to meditate on the limits of my personal "lupulin threshold", I spotted something different on the menu; Stone Smoked Porter. Far from the hop-forward beers that I had consumed that evening, this one was dark and rich, and presented a balance of roast and smoke. Further investigation revealed a number of beers on the menu that weren't hop-centric, and I began to suspect that my San Diego escapade would reveal a rich beer culture beyond the infamous IPA.

These suspicions were confirmed during a beer dinner at The Lost Abbey. There, we were treated to a five-course meal, impeccably paired with six flavourful and contrasting beers. We had two sour ales, including the multiple award-winning Cuvée de Tomme, a barrel-aged sour beer brewed with raisins and cherries, a Bière de Garde, a Barleywine, and two Dubbels (one of them barrel-aged). The Lost Abbey is a brand made by **Port Brewing**, formerly Pizza Port, one of the pioneers of the San Diego craft beer industry. According to The Lost Abbey website, the Pizza Port owners had wanted to offer Belgian-Style beers for a number of years before The Lost Abbey brand was created in 2005. Port Brewing's flavourful and varied portfolio earned them the award for Champion Brewery/Champion Brewer in the Small Brewing Company Category at the World Beer Cup this year. They also won four individual medals in the competition, none of which were for Pale Ales. While it reserves its *The Lost Abbey* brand for Belgian-style and barrel-aged beers, Port Brewing also continues to brew the "fresh hoppy beers" that initially put them on the map.

I only had one day in San Diego after the conference, and the list of breweries that I wanted to visit was long. Fortunately Larz Watts from Brew Hop, a great little San Diego company that offers custom brewery tours, was available and agreed to take me on a tour. Larz and I started the day at **Alesmith Brewing Co.** Founded in 1995, Alesmith has garnered quite a reputation (and two

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gold medals at the World Beer Cup) for the quality and craftsmanship of their products. Owner, Peter Zien, explained to me that the brewery uses a device called a hop back to impart rich flavours to the beer. "We really are not into that back-of-the-tongue upfront bitterness. There are plenty of breweries doing that, just really knocking you out with that bitterness. Drinkability is the key word for Alesmith."

At our next stop, *Ballast Point Brewery*, I was brought back to the world of IPAs. In addition to sampling some of the experimental beers that Ballast Point is known for, (including a particularly tasty Syrah-Barreled Bock) I also had the chance to compare and contrast the four Pale Ales on the menu, as well as an India Pale Lager. My host at the brewery, Fernando Beltrin, offered a short lesson on local IPA trends. According to him, traditional San Diego IPAs are more full-bodied and aggressively bitter, focusing on Cascade and Centennial hops. The more current approach to IPAs, however, is lighter-bodied and accents the aromatics. These beers are still quite bitter, but without the "mouth-puckering" quality of the traditional ones. The favoured hops in this case are Simcoe and Amarillo. He illustrated his point using Big Eye IPA and Even Keel San Diego Session Ale.

What better way to end my Brew Hop tour than at the brewery that won Gold at the World Beer Cup in the Double IPA category – *San Diego Brewing Company*. Brewer, Dean Rouleau, explained that San Diego is really known for its Double IPAs. In fact, they are sometimes referred to directly as "San Diego Pale Ales". My last brewery of the day was *Coronado Brewing Co.*, just a ferry ride away from the Marriott Hotel and Marina, where I was staying. There, I learned that five days in San Diego weren't enough for me to have undergone a "lupulin threshold shift". Although the Idiot San Diego-Style IPA (one of three IPAs on the menu that day) was well balanced, its bitterness was so pronounced that I barely made it through a 5 oz. sample!

Although I visited less than half of San Diego's breweries, I was absolutely overwhelmed by the quality and selection. When I asked the local brewers about the "boom" and how they explain the thriving local beer culture, their answers were all similar. Greg Koch from Stone Brewing sums it up best: "My personal philosophy on competition is that if a brewery is doing something that I respect... then they're not a competitor. They are a compatriot because they are raising the bar. Every time somebody enlightens a member of the public about the qualities of great craft beer they're doing not only themselves, but me, and the drinker a favour as well."



Whether you are looking for a bold IPA or something a little different, San Diego will have a beer for you. When asked to describe San Diegan beers in general, Zien offers, "...quality, full-flavoured ales and lagers. The offerings from local breweries are going to be full-flavoured, not necessarily full-bodied, but we're going to give you something to think about when you're tasting these beers – flavour."

For more information on San Diego beer events and local breweries, you can visit the San Diego Brewers Guild website at: www.sandiegobrewersguild.org Make sure you download the pamphlet!