Exciting Times for Craft in the East

BC’s beer fans may have been early to the party in their appreciation and understanding of craft beer, but if recent trips to Niagara, Toronto and Ottawa are any indication, Ontario is shaping up to be the place where much of all that is new in Canadian brewing, will take root.

I began this recent beer journey with a visit to Niagara College in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Having gone through the winemaking program I was interested to see the new brewery. I met with brew master Jon Downing, a genial giant of a man, who runs this teaching facility and who is responsible for their two campus beers: First Draft Lager & First Draft Amber.

Downing began as a hobby brewer at the age of 14 in his native England and by 1984 found himself in Canada. Under his direction the students brew pleasant, easy-drinking beer that is served at the campus pub and sold as 6 packs through the breweries beer store. But the beer styles don’t stop there. Downing puts the students through the full range of styles and this includes experimentation with barrels. He took me through the 6 different beers that they currently had on tap at the shop, finishing with a barrel aged barely wine (8.5% alc.) that was a stunner. None too sweet the “wine” was delicious and elegant with toffee and nut notes and ultimately reminded of a fine oloroso sherry. Another standout: Butlers Bitter a proper English classic made in commemoration of the War of 1812 and reputed to be based on a recipe of the beer served to enlisted men at the time.

The NC teaching brewery began life in the fall of 2009 and already the course has met with such success that a new facility, twice the size, is being planned. The demand seems to be at serious levels and NC has sights on running satellite programs in Alberta and upstate Washington.

The very existence of this school has clearly had a ripple effect as this summer will see two new breweries starting up in Niagara-on-the-Lake right in the heart of Ontario’s wine country with rumours of two others slated to open in neighbouring Beamsville and Grimsby.

The next stop, two hours from Niagara, had me at Brick Brewing in Kitchener and it was a bit of a home-coming. Brick was started in 1984, long before the word “craft” came into common parlance. Back then the term used to describe anything that wasn’t Molson or Labatt, was “micro-brew” and as we were in our rebellious university years, my friends and I immediately gravitated to the beers from Brick, Connors and later Upper Canada Brewing. They’ve recently released a mixed tall can pack consisting of Waterloo Dark, Traditional IPA (English in style but with a couple of west coast hop hybrids thrown in) and a delicious Amber that comes in at a respectable 6.8% alc. and reminds me a little of Alhambra. We should be seeing these new brews here in BC sometime in August.

Much has changed at Brick and they are now Canada’s largest independent brewery making a variety of products for other companies as well as Seagram’s coolers, a label they now own.

I had the opportunity to shoot a small video interviewing Bricks director of brewing operations and this will air on July
25th at 7 pm on the Just Here for the Beer radio show 650 am.

I was scheduled to meet with Peter McAuslan of Montreal’s vaunted McAuslan Brewing on a Wednesday so on a short stop-over I took the time to catch up on what was new in beer in Toronto. The Molson-owned Six Pints, operating out of a space formerly occupied by brewer Matt Duggan, is serving both the Granville Island and Creemore brands. As they’ve done from the start, Molson is careful to leave their name off these products preferring to let the myth grow that a tiny Ontario craft brewery (Creemore) purchased a tiny BC brewery (Granville Island) when the cold reality is that lawyers from Molson and Peller Estates Inc. (G.I.’s original parent company) hammered out the details of the sale in a boardroom.

Such is the threat that the Craft Beer movement poses to the big players, that they now recognize the need for tying themselves to quality rather than just mass-production, or risk further loss of market share.

What I wasn’t expecting was that Three Brewers (Trois Brasseurs a smallish “craft” chain out of Quebec) would open a three storey brew pub at Yonge and Dundas. The main room is standard and attractive enough but becomes increasingly impressive on the second and third levels where the copper kettles gleam like alien suns. The beer is good and a refreshing change from the fizz available in most tourist areas but the food was cynical and there is clearly no pride in that kitchen. Being German, I’m nothing if not an authority on sauerkraut and so I ordered one of their “house-made” choucroute platters. The sauerkrout had been diluted to the point of being flavourless and had clearly been dumped from a can and was only mildly warmed-through. The sausages were characterless and ultimately generic with too-tough collagen casings that factory meat producers import from China. Most strange were the peeled and boiled potatoes that minus their original jackets, still had a tough outer shell that required some sawing. This is often a sign that the potatoes have been parboiled and shipped in vacuum sealed bags or cans.

Much better was the Queen & Beaver, a British-style pub on Elm street just two short blocks from Three Brewers. Not only do they have good locally produced craft on tap, in cask and in bottle but there is serious technique coming out of that kitchen with smart, unconventional recipes (deviled lambs kidneys on dripping toast- shockingly good) with foods sourced from local farms. The rooms reverberate with tradition, are lovingly appointed and a far cry from those awful Firkin pubs.

For the BC beer traveller missing their daily dose of hops they might be well-advised to pick up Kensington Brewings (Toronto’s newest craft brewery) Augusta Ale, which has a sufficiently west coast flavour profile, courtesy of the Cascade and Centennial hops, to keep even the most critical Hopheads happy.

McAuslan Brewing is situated along the Lachine canal in Montreal’s industrial west end. It’s a plain-looking building and if you’d never sipped from the magic that they brew you wouldn’t give it a second look. If you’d had, then you would be eager to tour the facility and meet the man behind it all, Peter McAuslan. He’s a thoroughly modest raconteur with a gentle disposition and it became clear during the hours I
spent with him that his brewery staff find him approachable and genuinely like the man. *Happy Staff: Happy Beer* is perhaps a too-kitsch way of putting it but I'm convinced that's as much a part of these successful brews as Peter's original recipes themselves.

We finished our talk & tour on the McAuslan Terrasse, a green space in back of the brewery facing the Lachine Canal. Years ago a nine mile stretch of the canal was designated a national park and each day over the summer tourists and locals take a break from their runs and rides, for a rejuvenating pint from the full range on offer. I happen to have a deep affection for their seasonal Raspberry Ale and think it's the finest brewed in Canada, but having it on tap was another revelation altogether. The head became the sweet whipped cream on the raspberry compote, and the beer itself had a deeper berry profile with a brighter acidity that on the finish invigorates and uplifts.

For most people, the fact that Ottawa is even on the mental map at all is because it's our nation's capital. But ever since *Beau's* (half-way between Ottawa and Montreal in Vankleek Hill) started brewing their Lug Tread Lager, the public's interest in this ancient craft has been re-awakened and there's no question now that when you utter the words “Ottawa” and “beer” in the same sentence, the mind automatically turns to *Beau's*. The lager is their year-round offering but they do brew 4 other seasonals that never fail to impress. Then there's the Wild Oats series (21 brews at this point) where they push the envelope with styles such as Gose and Gruit. Years ago, when I'd first met the brew master and he pulled for me a tank sample of their Festivale, I remarked how it reminded me of the beer from my hometown of Duesseldorf. He was clearly pleased because it was then that he revealed that he was actually using an Altbier recipe and now the new bottlings actually sport the word on the label. Today *Beau's* Festivale remains the closest thing I've had in North America to that beer from home.

On the day that I was labouring through those odd sausages at Three Brewers, Ottawa Senators defenceman Chris Phillips was opening his new brewpub *Big Rig Kitchen & Brewery*. He seems to be serious about this venture as he has Lon Ladell, an experienced brewer formerly of Spinnakers in Victoria, at the helm. Phillips is taking this one step further in establishing his cred by growing his own hops on a property outside of Ottawa in Manotick.

It was a Friday when my friend Bill and I made the trip to Big Rig only to be greeted by yellow caution tape. Having been open just 3 days they were battling a kitchen fire. Happily it had been contained without substantial damage and everyone was safe. The beer
testing will have to wait.

Fine beer dining greeted me in the historic Byward market at Brothers Beer Bistro where virtually every menu item contains beer from their extensive brew list. The room is neat and casual, a contemporary mix of old and new elements. The beer menu boasts 52 different bottles (including 2 gluten-free) itemized by style such as Doppelbock, Trappiste or Cask Aged and 16 taps with a different cask blown every Thursday night.

![Brothers Beer Bistro](image)

The adventurous dinner menu consists of such items as Tuna Crudo that is cured in Radler and comes served with pig’s ear crackling and dulse, Steelhead Trout with ramps/fiddleheads and Mad Tom IPA compressed mushroom and beer-brined Steak Frites served with malt aioli and Dead Guy butter. The cooking was simply of a very high order with an emphasis on quality ingredients and presentation. This is no standard pub fare and at Brothers they’ve elevated beer culture, if not quite into white-cloth dining, then most certainly to the level of finer dining. Ottawans clearly appreciate this type of experience because the room was packed at 7:30 and there were few tables empty by the time we left 3 hours later.

It’s an exciting time for the Canadian Craft Beer scene when there is such growth in this industry that beer tourists have more options than ever to explore our country in ways that speak to them. We can be glad that the craft movement from coast to coast has changed the landscape so significantly that Canada’s two largest provinces are now so ferociously embracing authentic and original beer and the culture that it engenders.

- Ralf Joneikies