

# The RARE BEER CLUB

## SUPER BALADIN

PIOZZO, ITALY

*During the Michael Jackson years in the Rare Beer Club, starting about 6 years ago, we had worked a number of times toward offering this month's feature selection to our members. Hurdles included availability (too low) and price (far too high), and we were just never able to pull all of the details together and make it happen. But this month, and interestingly after just marking the one year anniversary of Michael's passing, we have found a way to get it done and deliver this delicious Italian brew to you. Thanks to the import efforts of B. United in Connecticut, with an impressive and eclectic portfolio of specialty beers - many of which come from Italy - we were able to secure just enough bottles to fulfill our quantity needs. As for price, well, it's hardly a secret that anything as stylishly Italian as this beer does not come cheaply. Think Ferrari, Ferragamo, and Friuli. Consider that part our treat, in finally being able to bring you Super Baladin.*



### FROM THE BREWERY'S NOTES ON THE BEER:

Just outside of Torino, Italy, in the village of Piozzo (population 1,000), lies Le Baladin directly across from the town hall, an extremely unusual brewpub and microbrewery. "Baladin" is a French term referring to a "traveling minstrel." The owner, Teo Musso, thought that this would be a fitting name for his brewery as the townspeople are known for moving around, especially between Italy and France. Upon visiting the brewery and meeting Teo, one finds that he is a very entertaining minstrel and has, thus, chosen the perfect name for his place. Teo studied at some of the best small breweries throughout Europe in order to learn his craft, and loves experimentation and never works by the books.

The Super Baladin is the masterpiece of the brewery and is most often the favorite among the customers at Le Baladin. It originated from an old recipe created toward the end of the 9th century following the style of the Belgian abbey beers. It is similar to a Belgian triple. The twist with this beer is that an English yeast strain is used for pri-

mary fermentation. Afterwards, it is bottle-conditioned for two months using a Belgian strain.

**Tasting notes:** A dark amber colored beer with good clarity. Aromas of warm flowers, apricot and banana, and bitter almonds are evident. Similar flavors of apricot, almond cake, citrus fruits, and rich malt come through strongly.

**Food Pairing:** This beer matches perfectly with ripened cheeses such as Port Salut or Trappist styles. It is also wonderful with almond sweets like a dry almond cake. Super is also good for "cuisine à la bière"

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*"Light wheaty flavors occupy the center and the beer slides into a long, dry, slightly tangy finish. The aftertaste has a warming glow. Super Baladin is beautifully balanced and it's perfect for baked or grilled salmon or arctic char."*

—Garrett Oliver, The Brewmaster's Table

# THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

## BEER INDUSTRY LEADERS OFFER INSIGHT INTO THEIR ATTITUDES

*With the recent news of Belgian beer goliath InBev's proposed \$52 billion acquisition of Anheuser-Busch, it seemed a fitting time to look back at this article that Michael Jackson presented in 1997.*

A couple of times, August Busch gave me a self-mocking smile, like a night-time talk-show host mugging to his audience. He didn't quite appear embarrassed, but perhaps the situation seemed a little pompous, even to America's (and the world's) biggest brewer. There he was, sitting at a table, on a stage, alongside the chief executives of the biggest brewing companies from each continent. It was one of those rare assemblies that prompts black humor: had there been an earthquake, half the world's mainstream lager beer might have drained away.

August was travelling with his son Stephen. If they had fallen down a hole in the ground, one of the world's most remarkable dynasties would have been at least partly submerged. None of the other industry leaders could call themselves family brewers as the Busch duo can.

They were assembled at the World Beer Forum, in Munich, Germany, under the rubric "Power Brands made by Power Men". Perhaps the muscle-flexing title was responsible for August's wry grin.

Competing brewers are hardly like to exchange strategic secrets at such forums, but the conversation did offer interesting insights into the attitudes of the world's beer emperors.

Emperor August told the packed audience that, if it were ever necessary, Anheuser-Busch would cut its profit margins to defend its market share in the United States. However, the company would not do this as a means of increasing its share. While not retreating from his previously stated ambition to reach 60 per cent of the market, he did describe this as an "upper projection...over a period of ten to 15 years". He emphasised the mature state of the American beer market.

Perhaps with this in mind, a questioner asked whether he would persist with smaller brands in speciality styles. August had already mentioned the growing market for more assertive-tasting beers, and now added: "We will pursue every profitable segment." However, he gave more time to the room for expansion in the wider world, with "the globalisation of American culture".

August currently reckoned to have nine per cent of the world's beer market, which he seemed to feel was modest enough. I asked him later how much of the world he would like, and he said that he would be "ecstatic" to have 15 or 20 per cent at some time in the future.

How achievable would that be? When A-B had begun to explore the world, in the 1980s,

market research had often been discouraging, yet subsequent sales overseas had been "a pleasant surprise". August's take on this: Research is a good servant, but don't let it be your master.

More Augisms: Be willing to change your approach. Just because it did not sell last time, doesn't mean it won't sell next time. The amount of money you have to spend is less important than the quality of your people. Remember, you have less to teach than you have to learn. Be humble; you are a guest in the other person's country.

Like Anheuser-Busch with Budweiser, its European counterpart Heineken is best known for a brand that is more than a century old. Heineken itself is family name, not "an invented brand," as the company's chairman, Karel Vuursteen, put it. He made the point that the consumer doesn't care how old a brand is, and responds best to a company with a consistent culture. Although he recognised that standard brands were declining in importance, he warned product managers against "obsession with the new." Through three generations, the foundations of Heineken had been "gut feeling and imagination," rather than the fashions of marketing. The company did not try to predict what might happen - rather to shape its own future. It did not, however, try to impose its presence, but to invite the consumer to enjoy its products.

While both of these companies are in a diversity of international markets, Kirin's chairman,

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Keisaku Manabe, saw his Japanese base as primarily a launching pad for expansion in Asia, especially China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam. In acquiring local breweries, or forging partnerships, he saw a need to maintain regional brands as well as introducing Kirin. "We want to widen the world of beer, not narrow it." His refrain, the need for patience in developing Asian markets, contrasted with the breezy cheer of Fosters' president Ted Kunkel.

"Lighten up! This is a fun industry!!" Kunkel urged the assembled brewers and marketing men. He explained that Australians do not take themselves too seriously, are irreverent towards the status quo, have a sardonic sense of humor, enjoy uncomplicated good times, like sport and winning, and live in a very clean country. Apparently these "Australian values" are reflected in Fosters, and have helped make the beer an international success.

The theme of South African Breweries' CEO Graham Mackay was very different from those of the other speakers. Although his company is a

continental giant, dominating its home market, the political situation in the recent past prevented it from even trying to develop an international brand.

Mackay spoke of the difficulties of brewing in a country where raw materials are expensive; the purchasing power of the drinker low; village home-brewing a major factor; transport difficult; and the political situation in transition from an authoritarian government to "freedom." I had previously wondered why South African Breweries had made so many recent acquisitions in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe; now I began to understand. They have the hard-learned knowhow to deal with such markets, to turn around the long-neglected breweries and perhaps achieve organic growth.

All this talk of cross-border beers may have seemed fanciful in Germany, a country where the overwhelming majority of breweries are still local. The premise of the forum was that brewers should pay more attention to marketing. I hope they understood the cautionary points made by Busch

and Vuursteen.

Perhaps they did. There was also a full house for a panel under my own chairmanship, in which North American brewpub owners, micro-brewers and contract brewers explained how they had built their businesses. The speakers were Paul Shipman, of Redhook; Dan Gordon, of Gordon Biersch; Ed McNally, of Big Rock; "Wicked" Pete Slosberg; and Jerome Chicvara, of Full Sail.

In my interventions from the chair, I tried to bridge a few cultural gaps. The strongest message from the panel was the need to provide the consumer with information about different styles of beer. This is true in the U.S. because of the sudden, confusing, diversity of styles. It is equally true in Germany because beer is taken for granted and specialities face death by indifference.

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Michael Jackson, the world's leading beer critic according to the *Wall Street Journal*—and author of numerous best-selling books on the subject—was the original founder of this unique club, which is also extremely popular with wine lovers.

Members receive surprisingly sophisticated beers that are often aged in oak, or fermented like Champagne, and delivered in 750 ml cork-finished bottles. These are beers that are intended to be

## The RARE BEER CLUB



paired with fine foods, and accorded the same respect as great wine. Obviously not for every beer drinker, they are extremely complex with a depth of character that is unheard of in the traditional beer-

drinking world. The selections for this club come from all over the globe with the emphasis on the countries that make the world's most amazing beers. Members are provided with monthly tasting notes on each beer, and an overview of recommended food pairings.

A standard membership consists of six 750 ml. bottles per month (or six 500 ml. bottles) at a cost of \$75 per month (plus shipping and local tax).

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