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## Pint paradise

Adam McDowell, National Post Published: Tuesday, June 24, 2008



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ImagesDrink up. A group of passionate craft brewers has made B.C.'s capital a strong contender for Canada's best burg for beer.

VICTORIA -- A cool breeze blows in over the harbour to take over where the day's hot sun left off, and the evening quiet of the quasi-suburban waterside locale is broken only by the occasional float plane landing nearby. A visitor at the second-floor deck of Spinnaker's Gastro Brewpub and Guesthouse is presented with a menu that boasts a wide range of beers brewed on the premises, plus many wines and local food suppliers. A pair of young men from Edmonton in town for a wedding have thirstily devoured their first round and now struggle to reorder two pints of the same - if only they can remember the magic acronym. Was it E.I.C? I.O.P.? E.I.E.I.O.? The server calmly waits until they're done joking around before suggesting they're looking for the I.P.A., meaning India pale ale.

No beer-loving resident of Victoria would ever make such a mistake. The British Columbia capital is probably the best place in Canada to order a local pint, and if you didn't know that already, it's probably because you won't often catch the locals boasting about their brews.

The tranquil north shore of Victoria Harbour wouldn't appear to be an auspicious place to brew a revolution, yet here one occurred, in the form of I.P.A.s, hefeweizens and English-style bitters. Spinnaker's is not only the oldest brewpub in the country, it also served as the catalyst for a Victoria brewing scene that comprises four such establishments in addition to a few microbreweries, notably the Lighthouse Brewing Company, Phillips Brewing Company and Vancouver Island Brewery. It's an impressive tally for a relatively small city (Greater Victoria's population is around 330,000).

What makes it such a lucky place for beer lovers to live?

"I guess Victoria is a small enough town that it's possible to influence public opinion. It doesn't take a lot of marketing dollars. People do your marketing for you," says Paul Hadfield, owner of Spinnaker's. He opened the brewpub in 1984 with two other investors and spent the first five years fretting not about a lack of business, but rather how to prevent the bar from going over capacity.

Of course, in a city where tourism dominates, out-of-town visitors have always been crucial. "Beer is one of those things that people travel for," Hadfield says. In the early days of Spinnaker's, he noticed the pub was getting a lot of visitors from a nearby country whose independent brewing industry at the time was much more advanced. "Americans were coming here to drink beer."

But while U.S. visitors may have put Spinnaker's on the brewpub-goer's map, it was the local population that kept it - and its competitors around town - alive and brewing. "We're here for the locals," Hadfield says.

"We have a strong, strong local following. I would even consider us a regular's place," agrees Michael Davies, pub manager of Swans Suite Hotel across the water, which has been brewing its own beers under the Buckerfield's Brewery name for nearly 20 years. "If you don't have that strong local following, you're lost. They're the people who pay your bills in the wintertime."

Along the way, Victoria's drinkers have become as discerning as Brits, Belgians and Bavarians when it comes to their beer, and brewers must up the ante to stay interesting. Swans offers beer-and-chocolate pairings, and Spinnaker's has been introducing more challenging brews, such as Belgian fruit beers.

"This is a very beer-savvy town," says Benjamin Schottle, the brewmaster of Hugo's Brewhouse and thus the man who dreamt up what's probably the most avant garde beer in Victoria: the woody and spicy Super G Ginger and Ginseng Cream Ale. It's available at Hugo's and the affiliated Sanuk Asian restaurant on Courtney Street.

Schottle, 37, represents a new generation of Victoria brewers (one that also includes Matt Phillips of Phillips Brewing, who learned the ropes at Spinnaker's). Ten years ago, Schottle arrived in Victoria as a refugee from the dull destiny he would have faced as a biochemical engineer at any major brewery in his home province of Ontario. Nowadays the cheery brewmaster comes across as half mad scientist, half laid-back West Coaster. Among the experiments fermenting in the copper vessels in Hugo's attic brewery is a not-available-to-the-public strawberry wheat beer with berry pulp floating in it. It's delicious.

Far from being worried that four brewpubs and three micros might be oversaturating the already beer-soaked Victoria market, Schottle thinks locals could support even more independent brewing. "I think there's room for more."

Competition could come in stiffer form. Earlier this month, Winchester Wine Cellars got a lot of attention for the release of its Victoria Gin. The company joined Merridale Cidery, Phillips Brewing (which has built a still) and others in taking steps toward creating a domestic craft distillery movement on Vancouver Island.

Most Canadians are unaware that we owe much of the success of our brewpubs to Victoria. Should a craft distillery pop up in your vicinity someday, spare a moment to propose a toast of gratitude to our westernmost city for once again showing us how to drink.

*National Post*