

## In Pursuit of Great-ness



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One of these years, dammit, I'm going to make it to all three "Great" beer festivals in a single season — The Great American Beer Festival, Great Canadian Beer Festival, and the granddaddy of them all, the Great British Beer Festival. I've done two of the three a couple of times — the American and British one memorable year, the Canadian and American a couple of times — but as yet have never made the perfect trifecta.

What's that? You didn't know there was a third? Well, yes, of course there is, and it's held in one of the prettiest cities on the west coast of North America, a short ferry ride from Seattle and a slightly longer one from Vancouver.

I note the above because I'm assuming that the least recognized of the aforementioned beer fests is the Great Canadian. That being the case, allow me to do my bit to remedy the situation.

town. Not that it's home to a huge number of breweries, but for a city of its size, there does seem to be a considerable amount of brewing activity going on, and much of it yields very good beer.

Of the four brewpubs, only one, Hugo's, is of somewhat questionable appeal. Billed as a "Brewhouse by Day, Nightclub by Night," Hugo's is best known for its Super G ginseng and ginger flavored ale, which I have enjoyed, but also found to be somewhat variable in character. The rest of the brewpub's beers are to my experience serviceable at best.

Of the other three, the Bucklerfield Brewery at Swans Hotel does its best with British-styled ales like the malty and warming Riley's Scotch Ale and nutty Appleton's Brown Ale, while the waterfront Canoe Brewpub excels with its Bohemian-esque Red Canoe Lager.

The pride of the city's brewing scene, however, is the pioneering Spinnakers Brewpub, which must certainly rank among the best brewpubs in Canada, and arguably even one of the finest pubs in the land, period. Also situated on the water's edge, although the opposite side to the Canoe, Spinnakers presents a positively idyllic setting in which to sip imperial pints of ales

attended, with admission tightly capped at 7,000 for the 2-day event and enough room on the field for about twice that number. Also smart is the early evening closing time, which certainly helps keep the drunken yobs at bay.

**The Beers:** Since its earliest days, organizers of the GCBF have encouraged the participation in the fest of neighboring American breweries, as much to excite the punters as to inspire their local brewers. It's a strategy that has worked, with BC now boasting the most exciting beer scene in Canada outside of Quebec.

Beyond the above mentioned local brewers, breweries making the trek from the mainland of BC include the newly organic Tree Brewing from the interior, cult favorite Steamworks Brewing, a downtown Vancouver brewpub that can never seem to bring enough of their Great Pumpkin Ale to satisfy all of its admirers, and the Central City Brewpub, a Surrey-based operation that is new home to a stellar brewer by the name of Gary Lohin, whom west coasters fondly remember from the North Vancouver hotspot brewpub, Sailor Hagar's.

From even further afield come western Canadian breweries like



Volunteers at the Great Canadian Beer Festival have their priorities right!

**The City:** The GCBF takes place in the British Columbia capital city of Victoria, which is located at the lower end of Vancouver Island well below where sits the mainland border between Canada and the US. The time is normally early autumn, shortly after Labor Day, which I suspect was chosen because it almost guarantees good weather for the outdoor event. (Since the GCBF moved to its open-air location, I'm told there has been a grand total of a single day of rain, and even that was more a brief shower.)

With a population of fewer than 80,000 — almost 300,000 in the greater capital area — Victoria is a small city, but one that is almost tailor-made for a beer fest. Like its US counterpart, Denver, it is a city built for walking, and as such getting around on foot is remarkably easy. When not in the mood for a stroll, I have seldom had difficulty in finding a cab.

**The Beer Scene:** Were it not for its curious lack of beer bars, Victoria could easily launch a claim to the title of English Canada's top beer

like the 20th anniversary Iceberg, a splendid pale ale-verging-on-IPA, the low alcohol Doc Hadfield's Pale Ale, a session beer that would do Lew Bryson proud, and the flagship Mitchell's ESB. As a bonus, Spinnakers also offers creative cuisine, a store selling house made chocolates, vinegars and other assorted victuals, and luxury B and B accommodations.

Other entries on the local beer scene include Vancouver Island Brewing, with its better-than-ever Hermann's Dark Lager; the slow and steady Lighthouse Brewing, crafters of the spicy but not-too-hoppy Beacon IPA; and the upstart Phillips Brewing, brewers of everything from the entry level Blue Buck Ale to the herbaceous, Belgian-inspired Surley Blonde and the potent and aggressively hoppy Amnesiac IPA.

**The Fest:** As already noted, the GCBF is an outdoor fest, held at the Royal Athletic Park, which is about a 20 or 30 minute stroll from downtown. It is one of the least crowded beer fests I have ever

Calgary's Wildwood Grill and Brewing Co., and the new standard-bearer for good beer in Manitoba, Half Pints Brewing of Winnipeg. Cross-border regulars include Elysian Brewing of Seattle, whose Night Owl Pumpkin Ale had me wishing for a pint, rather than a tasting glass, the Germanic lagers of Oroville, WA's Alpine Brewing, and also from Washington, Anacortes Brewing of the town of the same name, which this time around brought a wonderfully complex, dark chocolate Porter.

In all, there are some 50 breweries pouring over 170 beers, which is about one tenth the size of the GABF, but with 10 times the space in which to move. Coupled with a GBBF-style emphasis on cask-conditioned ales — each participating brewery is encouraged to bring at least one — and a complete absence of the big breweries, it all styles the GCBF as a calm and relaxing little brother to the older and larger Great fests. And a very pleasant way to spend a September weekend.