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Something's Brewing

The brewmasters of Victoria are as colorful as the many and varied beers they make



VICTORIA, B.C.—Benjamin Schottle loves ginseng chewing gum.

"I buy it by the crateful," he says.

He was happily chewing away one day when he happened to take a sip of beer at the same time. Of such moments are great inventions born.

"I realized that the two go very well together," says Schottle, who is the brewmaster at Hugo's Grill & Brewhouse. "So I decided to brew a batch, using ginger to smooth out the taste."

The cream ale with ginseng and ginger has proved so popular that it's won a permanent place in Hugo's lineup.

"It's the beer that's going to make me famous," says Schottle, who is every bit as effervescent as the beer he brews. And it's just one of the unusual ales served up by the brewmasters of Victoria, characters as rich and flavourful as their many and varied beers.

Whether you are looking for well-made, traditional beer or something a little more out there, this is the place to come. The city has several microbreweries (a couple of which only produce 15,000 barrels a year) and offers a self-guided walking tour — an "Ale Trail" — that takes in four of them.

"People here don't drink Bud Light," says Kristine George, of Tourism Victoria, a thought that's echoed by Sean Hoyne, brewmaster at Canoe Brewpub and Restaurant. "It is a very discerning clientele," says Hoyne, who planned the Canoe brewery and has been brewmaster there since it opened in May 1998. "The people here are influenced by the microbrewery culture coming out of the Pacific Northwest, primarily California, Oregon and Washington State and we are considered to

be pretty much cutting-edge.

"We have a huge British contingent who love their brown ales, their bitters and their pale ales. We also enjoy a level of affluence so that the price sensitivity that normally accompanies the purchase of beer isn't as influential here."

(A pint of beer in a brewpub costs about \$1 more than "regular" beer – running as high as \$6 or more, depending on the brand.)

"This is a very beer savvy town," agrees Schottle. "I think people on the West Coast look to enjoy life on more levels than they do farther east and a natural progression of that is to drink smaller amounts of very interesting beer.

"Baby boomers are at an age now where they are not going to sit down with a case of beer and plow through it. They want something more unique and higher quality."

Yes, indeed. Here's one baby boomer's staggered (if that's the word) journey around four brewpubs:

Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub

308 Catherine St. 1-877-838-2739, spinnakers.com

Canada's oldest licensed brewpub is a local legend and a pioneer of the microbrew renaissance in North America. Beers include an India pale ale (IPA), honey pale ale, nut-brown ale, a Belgium ale and a German *hefeweizen* (a wheat beer).

"I go to Spinnakers for the IPA. It's a truly outstanding beer," says a local doctor named Chris.

Brewmaster Rob Monk was born and raised in the Yukon and came to B.C. when his girlfriend decided to go to the University of Victoria. The affable Monk has worked at Spinnakers for four years and became brewmaster in January. The brewery has three full-time and one part-time staff.

Current projects include three fruit beers – blackcurrant, raspberry and cherry.

"They all came out real well," Monk says. "We are slowly selling them off and charging a good chunk of change for them – about \$10 a bottle but it is more of a dessert beer, with about 8 per cent alcohol. They are the kind of beers you take to dinner and share.

"The blackcurrant seems to be everybody's favourite, which is a bit of a surprise. I like the cherry, to tell the truth. I find it to be the most rounded and there are few competing flavours in there."

Spinnakers is currently offering three Titanic beers – The Unsinkable Molly Brown Ale, Titanic Stout and the somewhat ominously named Iceberg, a pale ale. It's all in honour of a nifty Titanic exhibition called *Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition* that runs until Oct. 14 at Victoria's Royal B.C. Museum, not to mention the fact that 20,000 bottles of beer went to the bottom along with the ship. (Another version of the same exhibition is at the Ontario Science Centre in Toronto until Jan. 6, 2008.)

Buckerfield's Brewery

Swans Suite Hotel and Brewpub, 506 Pandora Ave. 1-800-668-7926, swanshotel.com

Established in 1989, Swans was named National Brewpub of the Year at the Canadian Brewing Awards in December last year and has a wide selection of British-style ales and German and Canadian beers.

Brewmaster Andrew Tessier uses no syrups or sugars, just 100 per cent grain mashes. Ales take about three to five days to ferment while lagers take about 10 to 14 days. The ales are ready to

drink after about three weeks' aging, while lagers take six weeks or more.

Tessier started brewing beer when he was at high school and still uses some of the discoveries he made then.

"Right now I have 12 products on tap," he says. "We have nine regular beers, a root beer and two seasonal ones, including the Smooth Sailing Honey Ale, which won a gold medal for best in Canada for honey ale."

The best-seller in bottles: a raspberry ale.

Hugo's Brewhouse

625 Courtney St. Call 250-920-4846, www.magnoliahotel.com

It's at the base of the Magnolia Hotel and brewmaster Schottle's place of work is perched on the mezzanine level above the comfortably clubby bar. Schottle graduated from the University of Western Ontario in London with a degree in biochemical engineering and "did a lot of product research while I was there."

He's been at Hugo's for more than eight years, creating such beers as the Candy Ass Belgian Strong Ale, the Pale Moon Ale and a chocolate ale that used "lots and lots of organic fair-trade cocoa."

"I like to push the envelope of each beer style," he says. "I want beers of subtle complex, not beers with large flavour spikes but full and interesting; tumbling rapids or waterfalls, rather than still waters."

Canoe Brewpub and Restaurant

450 Swift St. 250-361-1940, canoebrewpub.com

Brewmaster Hoyne has an applied science degree from Vanier University and a master's degree in English (his thesis was on James Joyce's *Ulysses*).

His emphasis is on classic styles of beer, he says.

"The brown ale that I do harkens back to the late 1700s; the beers that were brewed in the north of England, the portside towns where they made porters. They are generally dark in colour, somewhat malty, very rich, very smooth.

"I make a British-style bitter reminiscent of the beers that you get in England where they are moderately hopped. I make a lager that is very similar to the beers that you get in Eastern Europe – the Czech Pilsner. I have done a blackberry stout and a cherry porter. People loved them. But I am not doing anything that is so avant-garde that people don't want to drink it."

And he speaks for all the Victoria brewmasters when he adds: "The great thing is that I can play around and try different things. Within reason, that is. Drinkability is at the forefront of everything I do."

For more on Victoria and the Ale Trail, go to www.tourismvictoria.com