

Big Rock partners with Spanish brewer

Transatlantic breweries collaborate on
Spanish saison ▶ DON TSE

THE BEER SCENE IN Spain today is much as it was in Alberta decades ago, before the late Ed McNally shook things up with the launch of Big Rock Brewery. Today's Spanish beer market is dominated by indistinguishable light lagers. Flavourful craft beers are few and far between.

So it came as quite a surprise to Big Rock president and CEO Bob Sartor when he came across some great Spanish craft beer during his hike in the Pyrenees mountains of northern Spain in 2012. Even more surprising was the fact that the beer came from Spain's famed wine region, Rioja.

The beer he found was that of Mateo & Bernabé and Friends, a nanobrewery in the town of Logroño. Despite brewing on a tiny six-hectolitre system (by comparison, Big Rock brews on a 200-hectolitre system, and even Tool Shed Brewing Company's new brewery will be a 25-hectolitre system) and being only two and a half years old, Mateo & Bernabé has achieved international acclaim. In fact, in its short lifetime, Mateo & Bernabé has already won medals at the World Beer Awards and been sought for collaborations by breweries around the world.

It took Sartor two years to organize, but Mateo & Bernabé's head brewer, Alberto Pacheco Martinez, recently visited Calgary to brew a beer with Big Rock's brewmaster, Paul Gautreau. "It is a Spanish saison," says Martinez, though his translator wife, Sara Gomez. "We used spices [orange and lemon peel, thyme and black pepper] and are fermenting the beer using a saison yeast."

"[Alberta has] the best malt in the world," adds Gautreau, "So Alberto was excited to take advantage of that. He provided the recipe, but we provided the ingredients."

The brew was made on Big Rock's smaller 20-hectolitre system using two-row pale, Vienna and Munich barley malts, wheat malt, and unmalted wheat. The three varieties of hops used include Tettnang, Hallertau and Saaz, which are referred to as being "noble" because of the delicate bitterness and incredible aromatics they provide.

The resulting brew will have a firm maltiness with a gentle hop bite accentuated by the spices added to the beer. In fact, the beer was designed to be accompanied by food; saison is a very versatile beer for pairing. Big Rock recommends enjoying this beer with barbecue or a spicy dish. A flavourful beer, saison has a delicate character and a high level of carbonation, making it remarkably refreshing. This makes saison an appropriate accompaniment for oily or fatty dishes since the carbonation can scrub the palate, allowing each mouthful of food to be enjoyed with fresh tastebuds.

Only one batch of the beer was made, so it will be available for a very limited time in September. The beer has yet to be named, but it will be packaged in 650-millilitre "bomber" bottles with a small amount available on draft at Calgary's finer beer bars. Grab it when you can and enjoy the unique blending of Spanish and Canadian cultures. Yee-haw-Olé! ▶▶

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— Paul Gautreau,
Big Rock Brewery



The brew team — Connor Kraft-Patrick, Sara Gomez, Alberto Pacheco Martinez, Robert Sartor, Paul Gautreau, and Jason Knutson — collaborated on a Spanish saison for Big Rock.

BOOZE