

The great white north

Don Tse takes us on a journey to discover the beers and breweries of Canada



A PINT-BY-PINT CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

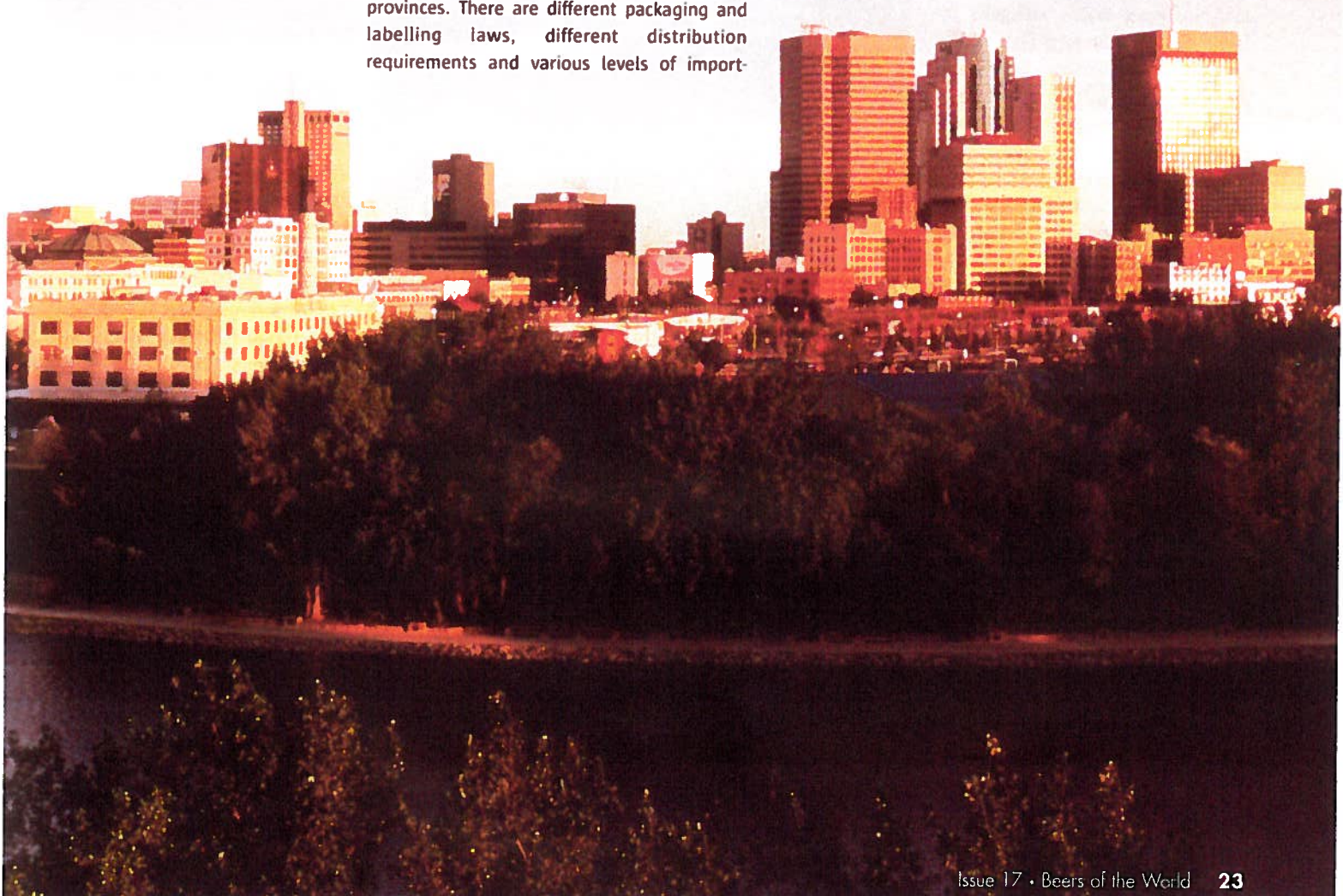
Canada lacks the long brewing history that Britain, Germany and Belgium boast. As much as 90 per cent of Canada's beer market is dominated by two brewing behemoths that make bland, inoffensive lagers sold on the basis of marketing rather than flavour. Worse yet, both are now controlled by foreign interests.

Even Canada's most successful foray into the craft beer movement is now owned by a Japan-based international brewing giant. It's hard to have a brewing culture to call your own when it's controlled by others. Despite this lack of brewing heritage, or perhaps because of it, there has been a recent surge in brewpubs and micro and regional breweries.

Alcohol in Canada is regulated at the provincial, rather than national, level and there is substantial variance between provinces. There are different packaging and labelling laws, different distribution requirements and various levels of import-

friendliness. This makes inter-provincial expansion for small brewers surprisingly difficult. As a result, local brewers serve primarily their local markets and are often an integral part of their communities.

As a nation largely settled by immigrants, Canada is culturally diverse. Because of the geographic expanse between major centres, the regions of Canada have maintained distinct cultures reflecting the early settlers to the regions. As a part of their communities, regional brewers reflect these cultures. So, the interesting aspect of Canadian beer is not the 90 per cent that can be found across the nation, but the dozens of local brewers that have been able to adopt and adapt the brewing cultures of other nations. The brewers take the best that the world of beer offers and make it their own.

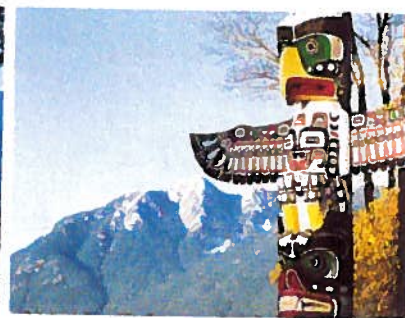
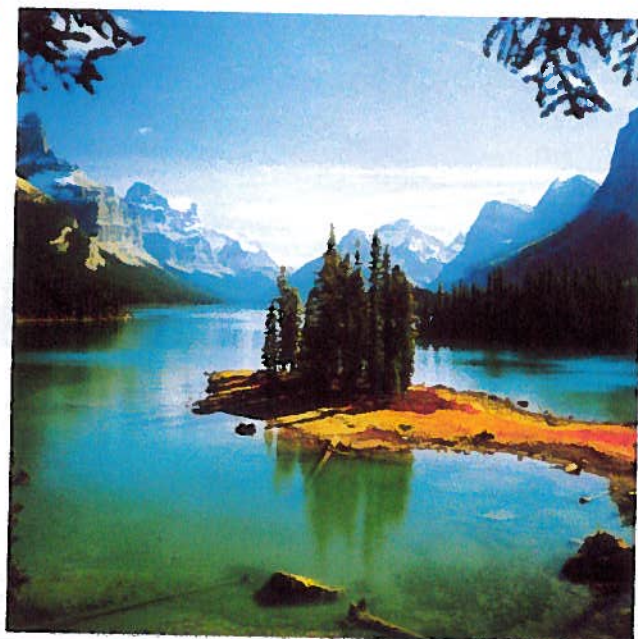


BRITISH COLUMBIA

Canada's western-most province is British Columbia. As the name implies, the province is very British. This British flare is most evident in its capital, Victoria, where local brewpubs and the annual Great Canadian Beer Festival, held each September, emphasise English-style ales, often cask-conditioned.

When visiting Victoria, your first beer destination must be Spinnakers, which was, appropriately enough, Canada's first brewpub. Here, you will find 10 beers on tap, including four cask-conditioned ales served through traditional English handpumps.

After Spinnakers, you can stroll along Victoria's beautiful inner

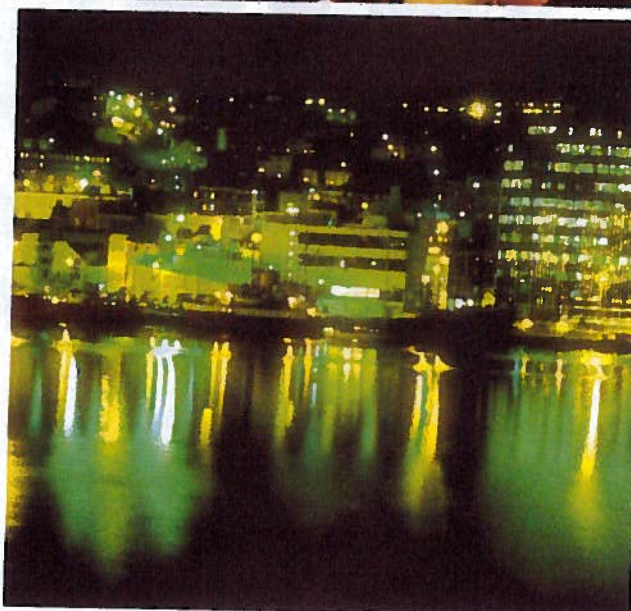
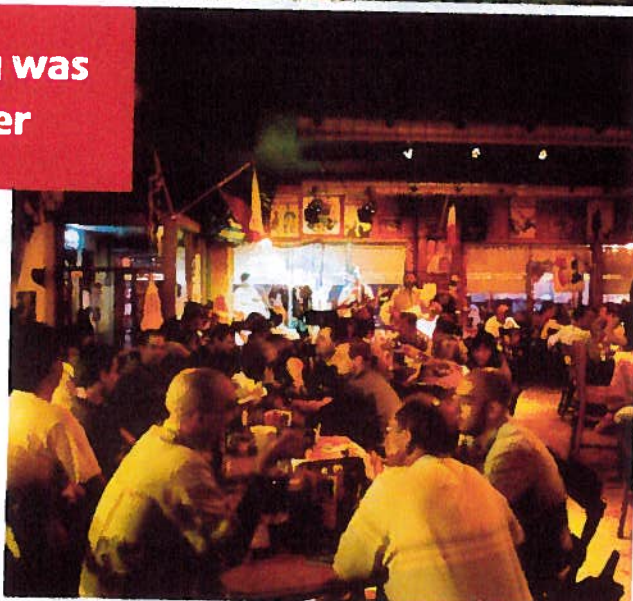


Sleeman Brewing was an early pioneer

harbour and across the iconic Johnson Street Bridge, designed by Joseph Strauss, who would later go on to design San Francisco's even more iconic Golden Gate Bridge. At the foot of Johnson Street Bridge is Swan's Hotel, which hosts Buckersfield's Brewery. Here, head brewer Andrew Tessier brews up 10 regular beers, three of which are served by handpump, and a rotating list of seasonal beers.

In Vancouver, British Columbia's largest city, Dix BBQ & Brewery hosts a weekly cask night and an annual cask ale festival. Head brewer Derek Franche serves up six regular beers and a special cask-conditioned version of one of them is served each week, usually alongside at least one other cask-conditioned beer from another local brewery or brewpub. While the beers are served by gravity from the casks sitting atop the bar, rather than being hand pulled through a traditional beer engine, the taste is still authentic.

Thanks to the work of local chapters of the Campaign for Real Ale, the brewpubs of British Columbia are doing their namesake proud.



THE PRAIRIE PROVINCES

The prairie provinces, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, are influenced by both Ukrainian and German settlers. And although the Ukraine may not have a long brewing tradition, Germany certainly does. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the prairies is therefore the land of lagers, they have certainly embraced German brewing tradition, including often extolling the Reinheitsgebot.

Alberta brewers include Brew Brothers Brewing Company, which makes Black Pilsner, a German-style schwarzbier that is better than many from Deutschland itself, a heavenly Hefeweizen, and a delicious Dunkelweizen, all in its eight-beer line-up.

Meanwhile, the Brewster's chain of brewpubs, with locations in both of Alberta's largest centres, Calgary and Edmonton, and in Saskatchewan's capital, Regina, features many great beers by German head brewer Gunther Trageser. Gunther's Hefeweizen, as well



as many German-influenced seasonal beers tantalize the tastebuds of the prairie dwellers.

In Saskatchewan, the best brewery is Regina's Bushwakker. Regular beers include Stubblejumper Pilsner, a style often emulated in the prairie provinces, and Dortmunder, a German beer style rarely embraced outside Dortmund itself. Manitoba's best brewery is Half Pints Brewing. Opened by former Bushwakker brewer David Rudge less than two years ago, Half Pints has already built a strong local following for its regular line-up. But it is their seasonal offerings, including Oktoberfest Lager, Weizen Heimer Hefeweizen and Weizenbock that show the creativity of the brewer and a nod to German tradition.

While the prairie provinces, and in particular Saskatchewan and Manitoba, has not yet cured the bland blues, a handful of brewers are tending to the beer culture as carefully as they are tending to their yeast cultures.

Previous page:

Winnipeg, Manitoba
Left, clockwise
from top: Canada's beautiful scenery; The distinctive vehicles from Steam Whistle; St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Pump House Brewery bar
Above: Pouring at the Pump House Brewery

ONTARIO

It is perhaps ironic that Ontario is home to both Canada's national capital, Ottawa, and Canada's most American-influenced city, Toronto. Toronto is located in the southern portion of Ontario, which dips well below the 49th parallel, the latitude that divides most of Canada from its southern neighbour. Ontario microbreweries favour American-style cream ales, brown ales and premium lagers and American hops such as Cascade, Centennial and Chinook.

Guelph-based Sleeman Brewing was an early pioneer in the Canadian craft beer movement. Sleeman grew to national status primarily on the success of American styles of craft beer. Honey Brown Ale, Amber Ale and Silver Creek Lager tickled the palates of Ontario's beer drinkers before Sleeman grew large enough to be acquired by Japan's Sapporo.

Thankfully, there were many other equally enthusiastic brewers to continue waiving the Ontario banner. Based in a town just north of Toronto is Magnotta Brewery, brewers of the True North line of beers which includes a cream ale and a premium lager. Meanwhile, in the heart of Toronto, Steam Whistle brews a locally-favoured premium lager that is starting to gather national attention. Steam Whistle's brewery is an abandoned train station within walking distance of many other tourist destinations. Just down the highway in Ottawa, Heritage Brewing brews Premium Lager and Traditional Dark.

While many of these craft beers could be accused of being pedestrian, Ontario brewers have now begun to jump on the American-led bandwagon of extreme beers. From Black Oak Brewing's Hop Bomb to County Durham Brewing's Hop Addict, there is no shortage of ludicrously hopped ales in Canada's most populous province.





Above: Dieu du Ciel brewpub in Quebec

QUEBEC

With a significant French-speaking population, Quebec is the most continental of Canadian provinces. This is reflected in the many French and Belgian style beers offered by an incredible number of local brewers.

Perhaps the most famous Quebec brewery is Unibroue. Although now part of the Sleeman group owned by the gigantic Sapporo group, Unibroue's Belgian-style beers are so well respected, they can often be found in Belgium alongside Belgian classics. When the imitator embraces the efforts of the imitator, it is the ultimate form of flattery.

But Unibroue is just the tip of the iceberg. Other artisanale brewpubs and breweries include Dieu du Ciel, Benelux, L'amère à boire, L'alchimiste, Hopfenstark, Le Saint Bock, La Barberie and Le Trou du Diable. And that is just a short list of Quebec's many brewers scattered throughout the big cities and the small towns.

Quebec has embraced great beer as much as they've embraced great living. Here, it will be easy to find Belgian-style dubbels, tripels and saisons in breweries' regular line-ups, rather than merely as occasional or seasonal offerings. French-styles of beer such as bière de garde and bière de mars are also commonly available in Quebec while virtually non-existent elsewhere in Canada, if not North America.

THE ATLANTIC PROVINCES

The four Atlantic provinces of Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have Celtic and Scottish influences. Nova Scotia is, after all, New Scotland. Local brewers on the east coast of Canada often emphasize Irish-style and Scottish-style beers.

Moncton, New Brunswick is home to Pump House Brewery that brews up a great, malty Scotch Ale while Halifax, Nova Scotia is home to Granite

Brewery which makes Keefes Irish Stout (and an imitation of Theakston's famous Old Peculier, though spelled in a more traditional manner).

Don't be discouraged by the relatively small number of breweries in the Atlantic provinces, due primarily to the small population. Alongside lush, rolling hills, the Atlantic provinces offer rich, malty beers.

THE NORTHERN TERRITORIES

The aboriginals in the north, not surprisingly, do not have much of a brewing tradition, but that hasn't stopped the only brewery in Canada's three northern territories, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, from brewing award-winning beers.

Yukon Brewing is located in the far-north city of Whitehorse. Despite having to import ingredients from great distances and brewing under incredibly adverse conditions, Yukon is one of Canada's best breweries. From the incredible Midnight Sun Espresso Stout to the floral Aroma Borealis Herbal Cream Ale, Yukon makes beers that are both creative and delicious. Make no mistake, there is no relying on odd ingredients to mask bad brewing. These are great beers that use unique ingredients to accentuate and add complexity. ■

