



The 9th Annual Vancouver Autumn
Brewmasters Festival



ATLANTIC
BEER
FESTIVAL



by Don Tse

drinking in the culture

CANADIAN BEER FESTIVALS

Canada is a culturally diverse nation. While the United States is more of a melting pot, Canada celebrates its cultural diversity. With less than 33 million people spread over almost 4 million square miles, to say that there are great expanses between Canada's major centers would be a mild understatement. But this geographic separation has helped the populated areas of Canada maintain unique cultures.

As beer lovers, we all appreciate that one of the best ways to explore culture is through beer itself. You can spend a small fortune and years' worth of vacation time travelling around the world in search of the great beers, or you can get a small sampling of them by visiting the Canadian cultural microcosm.

And there is no better way to sample a lot of great beers in a short period of time than attending a beer festival. As long as the festival emphasizes local beers, it is the best way to taste what the region has to offer, meet the brewers behind the beer and speak with like-minded beer lovers. While visiting a festival destination, you can immerse yourself in the local beer culture, including the smaller microbreweries that may have only local distribution, and the other activities of the city generally.

And thus we present the Great Canadian Beer Festival Tour.

Mondial de la Bière – Montreal, Quebec

Including the Grand Prix, an internationally-acclaimed jazz festival and the world's largest comedy festival, Montreal hosts a festival almost every week during the summer. And the summer festival season starts each year with the Mondial de la Bière, lasting five days at the beginning of June.

With a significant French-speaking population, Montreal is the most continental of Canadian cities. This is

reflected in French and Belgian style beers, most notably from Unibroue in nearby Charlebois, Quebec. In fact, Unibroue was named one of the ten best breweries in the world by the Beverage Testing Institute.

Admission to the Mondial (www.festivalmondialbiere.qc.ca), which is held in the heart of downtown Montreal indoors at the historic Windsor train station and outdoors in the adjacent courtyard, is free. The 4-ounce beer samples cost between \$1 and \$5 (all prices in Canadian dollars), paid for through tickets purchased at the festival.

Attendees of the festival represent a broad range of people. From office workers taking an extended lunch break to laborers from the nearby port, people of all shapes and sizes unite in the pursuit of great beer. Because a day care is located nearby, you might even see groups of small children passing through the festival, though hopefully they're not partaking in the festivities.

While the national brewers are present at the festival, there is an emphasis on Quebec's microbreweries. In addition, there is the Petit Pub, which features dozens of beers imported from around the world, including hard-to-find farmhouse beers from Belgium and northern France. From Belgium, you'll find the beers of four Trappist breweries, Brasserie de Silly and Brasserie Artisanale de Rulles and from France, you'll find the beers of Brasserie Castelain, Brasserie Pietra and Brasserie St. Sylvester, amongst many others.

As with the general population of Montreal, the audience at Mondial is quite culinarily aware and appreciative of the fine beers on offer. They are more than happy to share their knowledge of local beers and attempt to swing you to their favorites. While larger microbreweries Unibroue and McAuslan will often be mentioned, so too will smaller favorites such as Bierophilie, Le Chaudron and La Barberie. La Barberie itself will rotate almost 30 different beers through its taps over the course of the festival.

In keeping with the general culinary theme, festival exhibitors are not limited to beer. Chocolate,



*Visions from Canadian Beer Festivals:
Victoria
Victoria-Vancouver
Montreal (Clement Montel)*

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cheese and other food vendors (even gourmet French fries!) are present and scheduled food and beer tastings are held throughout the day. And if you just can't get enough of good beer, a relatively new addition to the festival is the MBeer conference where such internationally recognized beer luminaries as Fred Eckhardt, Charlie Papazian, Julie Bradford and Stephen Beaumont give presentations on beer and beer-related issues.

Because admission to the festival is free, you can come and go as you please. When the festival gets busy, during the Friday and Saturday evening sessions, take the opportunity to visit Montreal's many local brewpubs. Most are within walking distance of the city's subway system, the Metro. Make a special effort to visit Dieu de Ciel! (29 Av Laurier Ouest), which is commissioned each year to brew a beer exclusively for the Mondial; La Taverne du Sergent Recruteur (4801 Boul St Laurent), which locals will tell you is one of the city's best; and L'Amere a Boire (2049 Rue St Denis), located on one of Montreal's most lively streets, where you can sample as many as a dozen pub-brewed beers, including a couple on hand pump.

If you're in the market for beer to bring home with you or to enjoy in your hotel room, the primary outlet is the SAQ stores, which are government owned and operated. Beer and wine, but not spirits, are also available at corner convenience stores until 11:00 p.m., after which they padlock the fridges.



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The Toronto Festival of Beer (www.beerfestival.ca) is held for three days at the historic Fort York in the middle of August. This large outdoor venue in downtown Toronto makes the crowds of over 25,000 more manageable. Admission ranges from \$20 to \$30, depending on the day and whether tickets are purchased in advance or at the door. Beer tickets cost \$1, with 4-ounce beer samples requiring only one or two tickets. It is recommended that festival tickets be purchased in advance (this can be done online) as the festival often sells out.

The festival is hosted by The Beer Store, the beer retailer owned by Canada's major national brewers. Thus, the national brewers are allowed prominent presence at the festival (including “brand experience” areas where the big brewers can advertise their brand, rather than their beer), but almost all of the province's microbreweries are also in attendance, presenting their full line of beers.

While beer drinkers, as opposed to beer tasters, make up a large percentage of attendees, the festival is large enough that these people do not impede those who are serious about tasting good beer. Indeed, when the brewers meet someone who is genuinely interested in their products,

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Toronto Festival of Beer – Toronto, Ontario

Toronto is home to the Raptors, the only National Basketball Association team outside the United States, and the Blue Jays, the only Major League Baseball team outside the United States. It has sought a National Football League team for some time and is unashamedly the most American of Canadian cities. One could almost argue that Toronto, dipping well below the 49th parallel, is trying to escape into the United States.

From a beer lover's perspective, the result is a microbrewery scene that favors American-style brown ales, pale ales and premium lagers. Hops favored by American brewers such as Cascade, Chinook and Centennial are also favored here.

they are exceedingly friendly and are eager to hear your thoughts. Make a special effort to visit Magnotta Brewery. They are most famous for their True North line of beers, but their Traditional Altbier brewed exclusively with German malt and hops shouldn't be missed. Cameron's Brewing Co. and Lakes of Muskoka Cottage Brewery also offer a fine sampling of North American style craft beers.

There aren't many brewpubs in Toronto, but Stephen Beaumont's restaurant, beerbistro (18 King St. E), the Esplanade Bier Markt (58 The Esplanade) and C'est What (67 Front Street East) are must-visit beer establishments within walking distance of the city's historic Union Station. Further out, though equally deserving of your patronage, are Smokeless Joe's (125 John St) and Volo (587 Yonge St.). Beerbistro, Esplanade Bier Markt and Volo have more of a



restaurant feel, while Smokeless Joe's and C'est What more closely resemble pubs. That said, you will find much more than pub beers and pub fair at Smokeless Joe's.

In Toronto, beer retailing occurs through the LCBO and Vintages, both of which are government-owned, and The Beer Store, privately owned by Canada's national brewers. The Vintages location at Queen's Quay (2 Cooper Street) is the largest and has the most complete selection of beer in the city. In fact, the LCBO is the world's largest importer of alcohol, so it has a very good selection of beer, wine and spirits.

If you get lost during your beer wanderings, you can re-orient yourself by locating Toronto's CN Tower, which for 30 years has been the tallest free-standing structure in the world.

The Great Canadian Beer Festival – Victoria, British Columbia

Victoria, an historic city with a population of only 335,000, is very British. Local brewpubs and the Great Canadian Beer Festival, held for two days the weekend after Labor Day, emphasize cask-conditioned, or "real" ale. Here, English hops like Fuggles and Goldings rule the day, although the influence of nearby Washington and Oregon mean that Cascade, Mt. Hood and other American hops are also commonly used.

The GCBF is held outdoors at the Royal Athletic Park. Admission costs \$20 to \$25, depending on the day, and tickets must be purchased in advance. The festival sells out almost every year, so purchase your tickets early. Out-of-towners should visit the festival website (<http://pacificcoast.net/~patkinson/gcbf2006/index.htm>) to have tickets mailed to them.

Beer tokens cost \$1.25 with most 4-ounce beer samples requiring only one token, though a handful of high-gravity beers will require two. For the brewers, admission to the festival is only upon acceptance by the festival, meaning only those breweries deemed worthy are allowed to present their beers. You won't find mainstream, mass-market lagers here. Almost all of the brewers are from western Canada, though a few American breweries make the trip north to be in attendance. The emphasis at this festival is on quality, not quantity, with a significant percentage of beers served by hand pump.

One of the best things about the GCBF is its significant seating area. Grab a beer, sit down and meet some local beer lovers.



They'll tell you to try the beers of Phillips Brewing. If you've ever wondered whether or not you can taste the dedication of a brewer in his beer, the Phillips beers will remove the doubt. Rumor has it that brewer Matt Phillips was forced to sleep on the brewery floor in the brewery's formative years, the rent associated with both a brewery and a home being too great at the time. You'd have to be either really passionate or really crazy to sacrifice your home in the name of great beer. Thankfully, in the case of Phillips, you can't taste the crazy, just the passion.

Also worthy of a special visit are the beers of Crannóg Ales, from the interior of British Columbia. Running Canada's



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only certified organic brewery, these brewers are down-to-earth in every respect. The Back Hand of God Stout and the unhopped Bansidhe Ale must be sampled in order for a visit to the GCBF to be considered complete.

Victoria is a city that appreciates its ale and features four

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Beer in the Atlantic Provinces

Halifax, Nova Scotia, the largest centre within Canada's four Atlantic provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador), has great Celtic influences. Nova Scotia is, after all, "New Scotland." Unfortunately, you won't find much Scottish influence in the local beers. But Halifax is home to Propeller Brewery, which brews a fantastic ESB and, on a seasonal basis, a great India Pale Ale. Local brewpubs include the Granite Brewery, which is famous for its Old Peculiar, and Rogue's Roost (no relation to the Oregon microbrewery).

Meanwhile, nearby Moncton, New Brunswick is home to the Pump House Brewery, a local brewpub with a national reputation. Beer lovers from across Canada make the trek east (which is no small trek) to try its famous beers.

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brewpubs: Spinnakers (308 Catherine Street), Swan's (506 Pandora Street), Hugo's (625 Courtney Street) and Canoe (450 Swift Street). The latter three are

within walking distance in the downtown area while Spinnakers is accessible by a delightful water taxi through the city's harbor. Spinnakers was Canada's first brewpub and has done such extreme things as brew beer from hops that had been in outer space.

Beer retailing is still primarily government-controlled, though the province is now experimenting with privately-owned liquor retailers. Most notably, close to Spinnakers Brewpub is Spinnakers Spirit Merchants (130-176 Wilson St), which features the best bottle selection in the city.

Other Festivals

If you don't think a beer festival is reason enough to visit a town, keep in mind that wherever you might choose to vacation, you might be fortunate enough to attend the local festival.

Penticton, British Columbia hosts the Okanagan Fest-of-Ale (www.fest-of-ale.bc.ca) each April. Penticton is home of the Canadian edition of the annual Ironman Triathlon and is located in the heart of the British Columbia wine country. While the festival doesn't offer anything you won't find at the GCBF, Penticton offers the opportunity to bike through gorgeous vineyards, and is home to the Barley Mill Brew Pub and microbreweries Tin Whistle Brewing (try their Killer Bee, which is made with five different kinds of honey) and Cannery Brewing (with an ever-popular Black Berry Porter).

Vancouver, British Columbia hosts the one-day Autumn Brewmaster's Festival (www.autumnbrewfest.com) each September. Again, the emphasis is on British Columbian brewers, so there will be nothing here that you can't find at the GCBF, but Vancouver is a beautiful city with the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Rocky Mountains to the east. It will host the 2010 Winter Olympics and features many microbreweries and brewpubs. When in Vancouver, a special effort should be made to try the eclectic beers of Storm Brewing, which has a reputation for unbridled creativity. To be honest, unbridled creativity can be hit or miss.

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but Storm hits more often than they miss. From Echinacea Stout to spontaneously-fermented, oak-aged "lambics," its beers are deliciously unpredictable. Be prepared for something completely different.

On the other side of the continent, Moncton, New Brunswick hosts the one-day Atlantic Beer Festival



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Beer in the Prairie Provinces

Canadian shield is often jokingly referred to as the "bald-assed prairie". That's not entirely fair, but when it comes to beer, great establishments are few and far between in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. With a significant Ukrainian population, beer takes a back seat to borsch in the prairies.

And don't be fooled by the incredible number of brewpubs that exist in Saskatchewan (there are dozens serving a population of approximately 1 million people). Most exist merely to allow the owners to have an adjacent beer store. Other than these "off-sale" stores, alcohol retailing is government-controlled, so the beer at these brewpubs is usually a secondary matter and is sometimes downright awful. Fortunately, Regina, Saskatchewan is home to Bushwakker Brewpub where good beer is allowed to be front and center.

Alberta is the prairie provinces' saving grace. Great microbreweries in Calgary include Wild Rose Brewing (known for its unfiltered Velvet Fog Hefeweizen) and Brew Brothers Brewery (known for its great Black Pilsner schwarzbier), while Edmonton boasts Alley Kat Brewing (featuring a heavily-hopped Full Moon Pale Ale). A handful of brewpubs including Wildwood Grill and Brewing Co. in Calgary and Brewster's Brewing Co., in both Calgary and Edmonton, mean that good beer is around for those willing to look for it.

Alberta's biggest microbrewery is Big Rock Brewery, so named because of an odd glacial formation just outside of Calgary. Their beers are available everywhere, but its best, McNally's Extra Ale, which happens to be a favorite of Michael Jackson, will require some searching. It's worth the effort.



Victoria

(www.atlanticbeerfestival.ca) each May. While the size of the festival is relatively small (Moncton is home to a humble population of 100,000), you can't beat Canada's Atlantic provinces' natural beauty and splendor (see "Beer in the Atlantic Provinces" sidebar).

Whatever your favorite beer style is, you will find plenty of it in Canada. From farmhouse brews in Quebec to cask-conditioned ales in British Columbia, Canadians are proud to wear their culture on their pint sleeves. ♦

Don Tse is a freelance beer and whisky writer from Calgary, Alberta who enjoys attending beer festivals to meet new friends and taste new beers. His best friend is the one he just met and his favorite beer is the one he hasn't tried before.

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