

Wood: Adding Complexity to Beer

BY MICHAEL KUDERKA

Craft brewers, it seems, are in the continual pursuit of unique flavors worthy of inclusion in their beer. Inspiration can come from other beverages like Mexican coffee, desserts such as Crème Brûlée, your everyday peanut butter & jelly sandwich, or even the mild hints of wines and spirits.

For a number of brewers, taking their best beer recipes and exposing them to barrel-aging enhances the brand's complexity and increases its popularity. On top of the essences of the previous occupier of the barrel, oak imparts a dryness to the beer as well as hints of vanilla, which

may be described as "oaky".

Taking it one step further, as competition between brewers grows for the vessels previously used to age sherry, bourbon, chardonnay, Irish whiskey or rum, a few brewers are using the flavors of wood by itself to take their brand's flavor profiles to the next level.

Walking the PLANK

As part of their mission to explore new variations on classic themes, in 2011 Heavy Seas Beer in Baltimore, Maryland, began the PLANK project in partnership

with wood expert John Gasparine.

"We lean on John's expertise to try to understand what flavor nuances the different woods can bring to the table, then we have an internal discussion to determine what beer style will work best. For the most part the selections will be malty versus hoppy. We want the wood influence not to be overpowered by hops. We also try to make the wood character subtle, rather than overtly in your face – sort of a 'less is more' philosophy," explained Hugh Sisson, Founder of Heavy Seas Beer

Company.

The aim of the project was to influence the flavor profile of beer using woods that have rarely (if ever) been used in beer before. "While many beers have been aged in oak barrels, we wanted to see what other woods could contribute," discussed Hugh. "Our methodology for this experiment was a unique deconstructed approach, so instead of putting the beer in a barrel, we are effectively putting the barrel in the beer," continued Hugh.

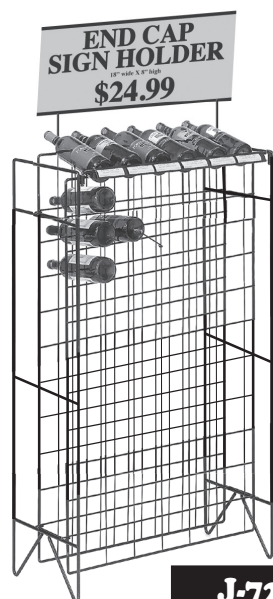


"There is a surprisingly large amount of research that goes into each project – such as length of contact time, amount of surface area of wood per gallon of beer, how beer ABV influences flavor, etc.," detailed Sisson.

Heavy Seas first release in 2011 – PLANK I – was an "Olde Style" English Ale aged on poplar wood planks. The wood was kilned to about 1/3 of the way to charcoal, and the beer was aged on the wood for about 6 weeks. PLANK I had an ABV of 8% and boasted a unique roasty flavor.

PLANK II followed in 2012 and was a German style Doppelbock that was aged on a combination of poplar and eucalyptus wood planks, again kilned. The result of this experiment gained PLANK II the distinction of being selected as one of the top 25 beers for 2012 by Draft Magazine. PLANK II had an ABV of 8.5% and had flavors of toffee and chocolate along with rounded woody notes.

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Color	Hop Taste
SRM = 13	IBU = 100

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Color Hop Taste

SRM = 10 IBU = 80

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Walker's Reserve Porter

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Color	Hop Taste
SRM = 33	IBU = 25

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Is there any wood that hasn't done well? "I can't say yet that we have completely eliminated any woods. We tried an example of a stout that was aged on a really menthol variety of eucalyptus and it was awful. But then we learned that there were many different kinds of eucalyptus, and we actually found some that worked well," described Hugh. "What we have learned is that whether the wood is being used "straight up" or kilned can make a big difference. With kilning or roasting the wood, there are some caramel flavors that develop that are great, and the harsh, tannic notes of the wood can be softened".

Next up

Plank III shipped in early July 2014. This installment of the Uncharted Waters series from Heavy Seas featured a Belgian-style ale aged on Jamaican Allspice wood. As for the next installment? "We haven't yet determined what or when the next project will be. So while we are committed to continuing the project, we don't yet have a timeline for Plank IV," Hugh concluded.

Thinking Out-of-the-Box?

How innovative is your store at selling beer? We would like to know. If you have promotions that go beyond refilling the cold box, we would like to hear from you and share your "out-of-the-box" thinking with our fellow Beer Trends readers.

E-mail me at mkuderka@mcbasset.com with your successful ideas for selling beer, along with your contact information. If we write about your program in our column we will send you a free copy of The 3rd Edition of The Essential Reference of Domestic Brewers and Their Bottled Brands.

Michael Kuderka is the Managing Partner at MC Basset, LLC. The company designs beer selling solutions and training for On and Off Premise retailers. Contact Michael at mkuderka@mcbasset.com.

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CLICK CHECK

PREDICTING VALUE IN WINE-SEARCHER SPONSORSHIPS

BY JAMES LAURENTI

For well over a decade, Wine-Searcher.com has provided arguably the most effective marketplace to buy and sell wine online. Consumers can search, locate items, and connect with wine retailer websites where they can purchase. From the retailer's perspective, Wine-Searcher also delivers typically a higher conversion rate (click-thru traffic that leads to sales) than other website referrers.

THE \$400 QUESTION

When it comes to listing products with Wine-Searcher, stores have an option to pay for a sponsorship to increase the exposure of their product listings. Today, given how crowded the online marketplace has become, having a Wine-Searcher sponsorship is a key factor in developing significant traffic from the site. That said, with a price tag of \$360-\$440/month (for retailers with 750+ products), it's a substantial investment—one which sometimes scares off would-be participants.

What's more, the return on investment (ROI) for this service can vary greatly among retailers. Stores with a higher volume of expensive wines tend to have better success than stores that mainly carry common call-brands. In a conversation with Ross Brown, Wine-Searcher's sales and marketing manager, he acknowledges that click-thru traffic on products at certain price ranges is not a metric they track, "but we do know our customers are skewed toward the top end of the marketplace." Stores with more eclectic selections and/or aggressive pricing also tend to perform very well.

This past month we decided to conduct some research to see how

some of these factors can be used to predict the ROI of a Wine-Searcher sponsorship. We chose, in particular, to focus on the volume of expensive wines a store carries. For stores on our Beverage Media platform with a Wine-Searcher sponsorship, we calculated their estimated ROI of the service for 2014 vis à vis the number of wines they list over \$50.

CORRELATION FOUND

As expected, when we plotted the data, we found a moderate correlation between how many wines over \$50 a store carries and their overall ROI with the service. More importantly though, all stores carrying 200+ wines over \$50 received significant sales greatly outweighing the sponsorship costs. For these stores, even those selling at aggressive margins can expect to turn a profit from the direct sales alone.

For stores under this 200+ wines over \$50 threshold, the ROI varies considerably. Some stores perform phenomenally while others have less impressive results. A closer look suggests that some of the other suspected factors—pricing and uniqueness of product selection—more greatly affect the ROI for this group of stores. The best performers tend to have less common products and low pricing.

If you're uncertain whether your store is a proper match for the service, October offers a strategic opportunity. By signing up for a fixed-cost 6-month sponsorship, stores can test the service during busiest eCommerce months of the year, which will mitigate some of the risk of investment. ■

To comment or to learn more about how Beverage Media can help with a website for your store visit BevSites.com, or contact James Laurenti at 617-864-1677. Follow us on twitter at twitter.com/bevsites.