

SCANDINAVIAN BREWING IN A BOSTON BREWPUB — IMPERIAL SKIBSØL

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While attending the Craft Brewers Conference, Anders Kissmeyer grabbed the opportunity to ‘return a favour’ by guestbrewing at the Cambridge Brewing Company.

Cambridge, as the city across the Charles River from Boston is rightfully named, is home to not only one of the oldest brewpubs in the state of Massachusetts, but also one of the very best: The Cambridge Brewing Company (www.cambrew.com). The brewmaster from the Cambridge Brewing Company (CBC), Will Meyers, has been a dear friend of Nørrebro Bryghus and the present writer for some years, and Will visited us in August, 2007, to guest brew two outstanding beers, which are now in the regular portfolio of Nørrebro Bryghus as Stevns CCC (winner of a bronze medal at the 2008 World Beer Cup) and Helene Heather. As this year’s Craft Brewers Conference took place in April in Boston (see separate article on the conference), Will and I agreed that this would be an excellent opportunity for doing a reciprocal guest – or ‘collaborative’ as is becoming an accepted and more appropriate term for such joint brewing ventures – brew at CBC.

When Will was in Denmark, one of his most unique experiences with traditional Danish beers was the sampling of a Refsvindinge Skibsøl – a low alcohol (2.5% ABV), top-fermented, dark and very heavily smoked beer style that is said to have been very popular with the hard-working naval crews on the vast Danish merchant fleet in the sailing ship era some 100+ years ago. ‘Skibsøl’ translates directly into ‘ship’s beer’. As I am personally a great fan of smoked beers, it was fairly easy to agree on this as a feature of the collaborative brew that was to be brewed at the CBC on Friday, 17 April. However, the thought of a low alcohol beer was not too appealing to any of us, so as the trend of making stronger versions of whatever beer style and then naming it ‘Imperial’ or ‘Double’

whatever has become quite mainstream with craft brewers, it was not as crazy as it may seem to attempt to brew an ‘Imperial Skibsøl’. In order to give the beer yet another traditionally Danish twist, and at the same time to let the smoked and malty attributes of the beer shine through as clearly as possible, we agreed to make the beer bottom-fermented. After some quite intense attempts at persuading Will into trying to do a decoction mashing on the very basic and manual ale brewing system at CBC, I had to accept doing this lager as a straight infusion.

RECIPE AND SPECIFICATIONS

When doing smoked beers, the choice of the smoked malt is always a very critical parameter with respect to the quality and the intensity of the smoke aroma and flavour of the finished beer. At Nørrebro Bryghus, we have previously brewed a beer, Momme Dampøl, celebrating 2007 as the year of Danish Industrial Culture, in which we used home smoked malt, using a small fish smoker and alderwood chips. Thus, I had more luck persuading Will to smoke about 25 kg of lager malt in his kitchen’s smoker.

With the aim of brewing about 1,100 litres of a beer with the following specifications:

- 6.0-6.5% ABV
- 70% RDF ~ (original extract: 15.5° P, and final AE: 2.5-3.0° P)
- Colour: 80-100 EBC
- Bitterness: 25-30 BU



Will devised the following detailed recipe:

DANISH IMPERIAL SKIBSØL

GRIST:

7%	House-Smoked Gambrinus Pils
3.5%	Malteries Franco-Belges CaraMunich 120° L
1.5%	Weyermann Dehusked Special CaraFa III
23%	Bestmalz Munich Malt 10° L
65%	Bestmalz Pilsen Malt 2° L
322kg	Total Grist weight
Target OG:	1.062/15.5° P
Target FG:	1.012/3.0° P
ABV:	6.5%

Single-infusion mash, converting at 152 °F/67 °C

2 hour sparge to full kettle height – 42"/373 gal/14 HL

90 minute boil

HOPPING:

30 BUs Bittering with Tettnanger Tettnang pellet (4.5% alfa)
Discreet aroma hopping with Hallertauer Hersbrucker and Tettnanger Tettnang

Knockout to Fermenter E at 58 °F/14.4 °C

Upon strong fermentation activity, gradually lower temperature to 53 °F/13 °C

Fermentation at 50-53 °F/10-12 °C

Raise temperature to 60 °F/15.5 °C for diacetyl rest

Lower by 2 °F per day to cold-conditioning at 32 °F/0 °C

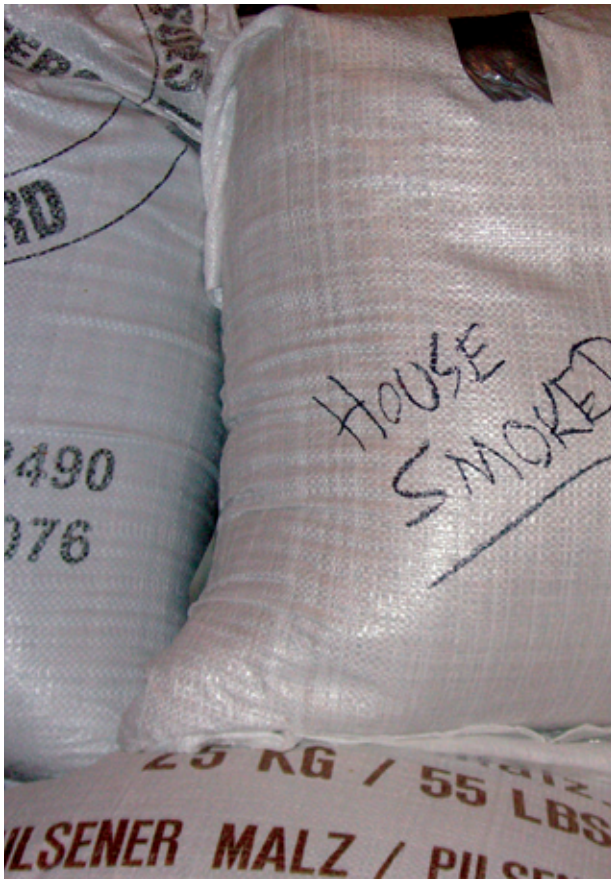
Lager for four weeks

BREWDAY

The brewhouse at CBC is not equipped with a malt mill, but relies on receiving the malt pre-milled from the supplier. This presented us with a fun challenge in the form of hand-milling the 25 kg of home smoked malt and the 4.5 kg of husked black malt before we were ready to mash-in. The brew crew and the present writer took turns on the small, manual homebrewer's grain mill, purchased for the purpose, while Will was desperately trying to devise a shaft that would allow the mill to be operated by the power drill in the brewery's toolbox. After about 45 minutes and with little over 2 kg of malt remaining to be milled, he succeeded!

Mashing in at CBC is entirely manual. Not only carrying sacks of milled malt up the ladder, dumping it into the mash tun, but also the mixing, which is performed with an oar from a rowing boat. With a total amount of grist of 322 kg, this is an exercise that saves the brewer the expense of paying expensive gym membership fees! Both temperature (66.5 °C) and mash pH (5.45) were where we hoped they would be, so the mash was left to convert for 90 minutes. Wort recirculation after mashing and before start of the run-off is equally manual – buckets are filled with turbid first wort from the outlet and poured back onto the top of the mash bed through a large kitchen sieve, preventing disturbance of the bed, until the clarity is satisfactory. When this is the case, the wort runs by gravity from the mash tun to the kettle.

The first wort was at the expected strength (23° P), and at CBC the sparging begins almost immediately after the start of the run-off, keeping the mash tun virtually brimful all through the →





run-off process. At kettle full, the extract was surprisingly high – 16.1° P vs. our aim to have a strength of 15.5° P after the boil – so the wort was diluted with water prior to the boil. In order to not create too much caramelisation flavour, the boil was kept to 90 minutes. Hop additions during the boil were with Tettnanger and Hallertauer to 30 BUs. After the boil, a whirlpool process took place in the kettle by circulation through a tangential inlet on the side. The cooling is done just with city water – in the winter and spring this is sufficiently cold to allow cooling to lager fermentation temperatures, 12 °C in this case – and the wort was pitched with a Danish lager yeast.

However irrelevant this might be to the context of the brewing of the 'Imperial Skibsøl', I still have to mention how we finished of this great brewday at CBC: Will took a few sampling glasses, a spray bottle with disinfectant and let me down to the cellar below the brewpub. Although this cellar

is a far cry from the romantic barrel cellar of an old Belgian brewery, the cramped, low ceiling and dark cellar below the CBC holds – take my word for it! – more magic than what you will find in any of those Belgian, romantic crypts. Over the more than ten years that Will has experimented with oak barrel ageing of beers here, he has gathered more than 50 oak barrels, all filled with the most fascinating and beautiful, complex beers of a great variety of styles ranging from lambics over barley wines to imperial stouts. Some re-fermented with wild yeasts and bacteria, others simply absorbing oak character from French oak wine barrels and American oak spirit barrels. I say oak character, because Will – being the subtle, very European-style brewer not so common in the US, where bigger is often considered better, he is – does not favour the use of spirit barrels fresh from the distiller. As many readers will know, Boston is home to another renowned brewing company having achieved worldwide recognition for their extremely strong, complex

and expensive wood aged beers (e.g. 'Utopias'), and Will quite simply gets his spirit barrels from this brewery after they have used them for beer already once. I would love to spend several pages going overboard in praise of all the beers tasted during the couple of hours Will allowed me to spend with him in this 'heaven under earth' for true beer lovers, but I shall have to put this off for another time. And it would require that I go back there and spend a lot more time in order to take comprehensive notes...

PROCESS AND FINISHED BEER QUALITY

Fermentation was carried out at 12 °C for 15 days until reaching 3.0° P in apparent extract. At this point, the temperature was allowed to rise freely to 15.5 °C in order to ensure efficient diacetyl reduction. After another two days, the beer was gradually cooled in the tank over a total of 6 days to 0 °C for cold lagering for another 28 days.

Cambridge Brewing Company plans to release the beer for sale on draught at the brewpub around 29 May, and no packaging of the beer is planned, as CBC does not package its beers. So, if you happen to be in Boston anytime within a few weeks from the release date – these 'specials' sell out fast at the CBC – do by all means stop by, try the beer and let us know what you think!

Will has provided me with the following tasting notes that represent the beer at almost its final stage:

'The beer just reached 0 °C a few days ago, and is already showing remarkable clarity and a deep, rich mahogany mien. Smokiness is quite noticeable in the nose and on the palate, but is very soft and smooth in character and melds nicely with Munich-like, bready malt flavours. The nose is clean, with no sulphur or diacetyl, and the body is full without any cloying sweetness. Overall, much more subtle than a Bamberg-style smoked beer, showing, I feel, great finesse. (I did a masterful job of smoking all that pilsner malt!)' ~ WM.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Will Meyers and the brew crew at the Cambridge Brewing Company for bearing with me and allowing me this opportunity to brew with them in the country that was once the cradle of the craft beer revolution and now is the centre for brewing innovation, and, specifically, at a brewpub that is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year and still stands as model for all the rest of us with respect to quality and innovation as regards beer, food and how to become a cornerstone in the local community. ☺



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