



- Special to the Daily

Vail Hophead column: Building a beer dinner

Experimentation and imagination are key to creating memorable pairings

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If you go ...

What: Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines Festival.

Where: Vail Cascade Resort, Vail.

When: Jan. 10 to 12.

More information: Tickets are still available for the Commercial Tasting and various seminars. For ticket information and pricing and a full schedule of events, visit www.bigbeersfestival.com.

VAIL — There are two ways to design a beer-pairing dinner. The first is to start with the menu for a meal and taste a bunch of beers until you find the ones that suitably match each dish. The second is to take some of the best beers in the country, pair them up two by two like animals on the Ark and march them across the palates of some creative chefs. The culinary team then combines bits and pieces of the beers' flavor profiles and marries them up with ingredients to build dishes that compliment the brews.

I've seen both approaches work, but the latter is the process used to create the Collaboration Dinner on Jan. 10, part of the Big Beers, Belgians & Barleywines Festival, featuring beers from Avery Brewing Co., of Boulder, and Dogfish Head Craft Brewed Ales, of Delaware.

Adam Avery, beer guru behind Avery Brewing Co., said that brewery has been involved with the Big Beers festival since Day 1, having known founder Bill Lodge and his sister, current Big Beers maven Laura Lodge, for about 15 years. Brewers like Avery don't get a whole lot of vacations when they're spending every day battering down the doors of brewing convention and peddling their wares all over the country.

"It's a great fest," Avery said. "They do a really good job of taking care of the brewers, getting us places to stay, ski passes. ... How many festivals can you go to and you're skiing the day of the fest or the day before the fest?"

Avery has been to almost all of the Big Beers festivals, this being the 13th anniversary of the event. He said Laura Lodge originally approached him about doing a brewers' dinner and asked him to get brewing buddy Sam Calagione, founder and president of Dogfish Head, to sign on. Being a powder hound tele skier, Calagione agreed, and the Calibration Dinner, now a Big Beers staple, was born.

Logistical balancing act

For the past few years, the Calibration Dinner for Big Beers has been hosted by Atwater on Gore Creek at the Vail Cascade Resort, where the festival is held. Executive Chef Todd Bemis, Chef de Cuisine Stephen Belie and Restaurant Chef Jay Spickelmier lead their team in a logistical ballet, cooking and plating this four- or five-course dinner for 100 hungry faces, all while the restaurant remains open for dinner service.

Belie said that balancing act is ultimately more difficult than the creativity and fun of creating a menu to showcase the specialty beers the breweries trot out for this dinner. That whole process starts with a trip down to Boulder. Belie said the Avery guys stand in as representatives of Sam's beers, as well as their own, during the tasting stage.

"They know Sam's beers so well," Belie said. "They're so articulate. It's exciting for us and forces us to push the envelope."

Each beer from Avery is matched up with a beer from Dogfish Head and then presented to the chefs to sip and savor and work their magic, imagining how different elements of a dish would enhance the flavor or aroma of the beer. The result and presentation have been staggeringly multifarious, ranging from flaming ride-along shots of rum to one very memorable hot-pink ball of spun cotton candy that had Avery breaking the no swearing on

the dinner microphone rule.

Jaw-dropping fare

This year, the Atwater culinary crew came up with a jaw-dropping black cod served with garlic cauliflower puree, raisin saucette, porchetta and flame grapes and a touch of dry-cured diced olives for salt. The sweet grapes and raisin saucette pick up the fruity tones of Dogfish Head's Raison D'Extra, and the bit of salt from the cured olives amps up the roasty, malty characteristics of Avery's Uncle Jacob's Stout. The team bucked the expectation of an easy dessert pairing for these beers, hoping to again achieve cotton-candy levels of infamy. Belie said he's confident the dish will add a whole new dimension to the meal.

The mutual respect between the brewers and the chefs is apparent in the way they talk about each other's crafts. Avery said the Big Beers Calibration Dinner is one he looks forward to every year because of the creativity and dedication of the Atwater chefs. Belie said working with the Dogfish Head and Avery beers continually pushes his team to new culinary heights.

"You know the chef is pushing the envelope, he wants to do something exciting and different - those are the best guys to work with," Avery said. "Here are all my beers that are super special - barrel series, super limited and never to be seen again. I'm bringing my A game, and I like to do these dinners with chefs who do the same thing. They are creating pieces of art, and that's kind of a one-time deal, making a plate that they'll maybe never do again. It's the same spirit of experimentation and imagination, and those guys up there do it right."

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