



TOPIC: PRODUCT INNOVATION, QUALITY

# BREWING FLAVOURED BEER THE LATIN AMERICAN WAY

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## A Commentary with Stephen Beaumont

North American drinkers old enough to remember the early days of the craft beer renaissance will also recall a time when fruit beer was looked upon with grave suspicion. Never mind the traditional and generally respected fruited Kriek and Framboise lambics of Belgium, which made their first appearance on our shores around the same time, most domestic fruit beers were regarded as novelties meant for those who might otherwise enjoy Bartles & Jaymes wine coolers or Bacardi Breezers.

Over time, of course, attitudes changed and fruit beer became not only accepted, but even celebrated, and North American brewers embraced the notion of adding fruit – as well as a massive and diverse variety of other ingredients! – to their beer.

As an early advocate of fruited and flavoured beers, I embraced this movement from the outset, offering deserved praise to everything from masterfully crafted cherry beers like the legendary New Glarus Wisconsin Belgian Red to skillfully blended beer-and-juice combos such as St. Ambroise Apricot Wheat and early efforts at what we now refer to as 'pastry stouts.' But while some were indeed good enough to evoke comparison with the great fruited and spiced beers of Belgium, the vast majority of such beers in both Canada and the United States were either disappointing or pleasant and enjoyable, but still lacking a certain ...something.

Then I began exploring Latin American craft beer.

Being very youthful craft beer markets in the early twenty-teens, Mexico and South America were not at first the most interesting of brewing cultures. The potential was there, for certain, evident in such beers as the Brazilian Way Beer Amburana Lager and Cervecería Calavera's Mexican Imperial Stout, but as with most young craft beer nations, flaws were often in evidence and true creativity was lacking. Then came the middle of the decade and Latin American craft brewing found its feet and began to blossom, often on the back of fruited and flavoured beers.

The difference between the Latin and non-Latin American approaches to brewing with added ingredients emerged when brewers in the United States started producing Mexican-style Imperial stouts, flavoured with chocolate and spices, often including chilli peppers, referencing the famous Oaxacan sauce, molé. I tried several, and while most were tasty enough, I felt that all missed the mark in some ineffable way, and most certainly paled in comparison to the best I had tasted in Mexico.

A conversation I later had with a Mexican brewer furthered my understanding of why this was so. Mexican kids, whether boys or girls, learned how to cook at home, usually by their mother's side, he explained, and as such, they approached brewing in much the same way they would cooking. So where a brewer north of the Mexican border might think to brew a beer style and flavour it with an added ingredient or two, he suggested, a Mexican brewer approached those extra ingredients as being integral parts of the finished product, equal to the malt and hops and yeast.

As I travelled further within Latin America, this approach – call it holistic brewing, if you will – revealed itself time and again, most often in relation to unique local ingredients. So when a brewery like Lohn Bier in Brazil created their Carvoeira, an Imperial stout with tonka beans and dried mushrooms, or Ecuador's Bandito Brewery made their GUA.P.A., an IPA flavoured with locally sourced guayusa leaves, high in both caffeine and flavour, each tasted less like a flavoured strong ale than they did a skillfully integrated combinations of ingredients.

And never was this approach more in evidence to me than it was during my final pre-pandemic trip in early 2020, when I ventured to the south of Brazil and the Festival Brasileiro da Cerveja to investigate the rapidly emerging beer style known as the Catharina Sour.

Essentially a kettle-soured Berliner Weisse of above average strength, usually 5-5.5%, the Catharina Sour is habitually flavoured with fruit and sometimes other spices and/or herbs. Yet despite this apparent simplicity, it often – I might even say usually – rises to levels of flavour and complexity that far outreach those of conventional fruited kettle sours, in a fashion which cannot be explained merely by the novelty of combinations such as as pineapple, pink peppercorns, and rosemary or the exoticism of Amazonian fruits like cupuaçu or jabuticaba.

Perhaps because this approach is so culinarily-based, the closest I can come to it in the non-Latin American world is in a pair of connected European countries, both with strong gastronomic traditions: Belgium and Italy. (It may also hold force in France, which now boasts more craft breweries within its borders than does any other nation in Europe, but it has been some time and several hundred breweries since my last visit.) Even so, however, there is definitely something uniquely exciting about what is happening in Latin American brewing today, which is why I regularly cite Mexico and Brazil as two of the most intriguing craft beer scenes in the world.

Either – and indeed most of South America – is worthy of a visit these days by any brewer seeking to expand their understanding of brewing beyond the four basic ingredients.