

The Set-Up

Spicy threw back her head and laughed, open-mouthed and loudly. The suburbanites shifted in their seats, pretending that their attention hadn't shifted, suddenly and completely, to the woman at the edge of the bar. She sipped a bitter beer and finished a slice of pizza with the raw seductiveness only a rugged farm girl can have. The beer tasting was about to begin.

The homebrewers, Hop-Jack and Magistrate, who moonlight as certified beer judges, were already there, reliable and professional. Vinny, having finished slinging a final few pizzas and specialty Italian dishes to eager customers, meandered over, nodding to regulars and shaking hands like a pro. New Kid, comparatively new at homebrewing – about 4 years in – and new to the tastings, saddled up to the tasting circle.

The blind tasting featured wheat beers, and that was all the tasters knew. After their compliments were complete, the beer they had just tasted was revealed before the next arrived unmarked into their hands.

The Beer

Wittekerke (Belgian White Beer, 5%), **Br. Bavik, Bavikhove, Belgium**

"Smells great for a change," Spicy said, "because normally beer smells awful." Vinny took the beer on a ride across the ocean and guessed it was an American wit, "not earthy enough" to be Belgian. GONG! Magistrate agreed that the beer was nice and soft, lacking some of the "Big Belgian" flavors. This mellowness was a plus for Hop-Jack, who is not a big fan of wheat beers. Still, New Kid pointed out, between the cloudiness and the sweet orange, lemon zest, citrus flavors, there was no question that this was a classic wheat beer. It was unintrusive enough to be a good introduction to the timid and classic enough to be enjoyed by the style's fans.

Ommegang Witte, **Brewery Ommegang, Cooperstown, N.Y.**

"There's more 'foot' in the nose," Vinny announced, which some people thought was a weird thing to say until it was explained that wheat beers can be like good cheese: stinkiness is an valued attribute. "There are lots more flavors in this," Hop-Jack said, making a face. "It's more adventurous." Magistrate noted it had a bigger body, a tart finish and more spice, particularly coriander. The tartness accelerated as the

beer warmed, New Kid pointed out. It was a beer that wine lovers could appreciate, he added, dry with nice spices. And an after-taste that pleasantly lingers, Spicy said.

Solstice Weiss (Bavarian White, 50% malted wheat and triple fermentation), **New Glarus Brewing Co., New Glarus, Wis.**

This time there was also banana in the nose, Spicy said. Hop-Jack sensed phenolic qualities at first, but those, he said, quickly gave way to bubblegum and banana after a few swirls

of the glass. The mild bubblegum notes, a classic flavor of wheat ales, increased as it warmed. This was a sweeter beer, but not cloying or unpleasantly sweet. "A lot of sugar," Vinny said, "brown sugar. Nice. Gives it a rich body." Magistrate agreed that it had a big body for a wheat beer and seemed to be quite high in alcohol.

The noticeable yeast added more classic wheat ale qualities and flavors. New Kid added raisin and melon to the after-flavors of this big, spicy wheat.

Penn Weizen, **Pennsylvania Brewing Company, Pittsburgh, Pa.**

A complex nose, there was some classic element that everyone could point out without repeating someone else: spicy and yeasty said New Kid, bubblegum said Spicy Woman, and Magistrate added sour. It was highly carbonated, spritzzy on the tongue. While cloudy like the others, Hop-Jack pointed out how it was two-toned in the glass, lighter at the top, darker at the bottom. "Clean, bubblegum and a little banana," Hop-Jack said succinctly. The flavors were enjoyable, Vinny said, but not entirely complex. New Kid added that it was, nonetheless, intensely flavored. The pleasant intricacies of the beer continued in the aftertaste in which tasters detected tartness and more banana notes.

**New Glarus
Brewing Co.**



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