

Mr. Wiebe Goes to Washington

after a slow start and a couple of misses, the hits came **fast & flavourful...**

by Joe Wiebe

Before my recent trip to Washington DC, all I knew about the American capital was what I'd seen on *The West Wing* or other movies shot there. I certainly had never heard of a beer from there. The closest was probably Dogfish Head in Delaware or maybe something from Baltimore or Philadelphia. So when I was sent there on business, I decided to see if there was a DC beer scene worth mentioning.

After a day of flying from Vancouver, I finally got to my downtown hotel around 9:30pm. I was hungry – and thirsty – so I set out to find a good place for a bite and a beer. Outside the hotel, however, I quickly got the sense that downtown DC was already shuttered for the night. There weren't many people out and I saw few restaurants with lights on. I meandered a bit more, though, and then spotted a retro-style sign advertising a basement joint called Stan's Restaurant.

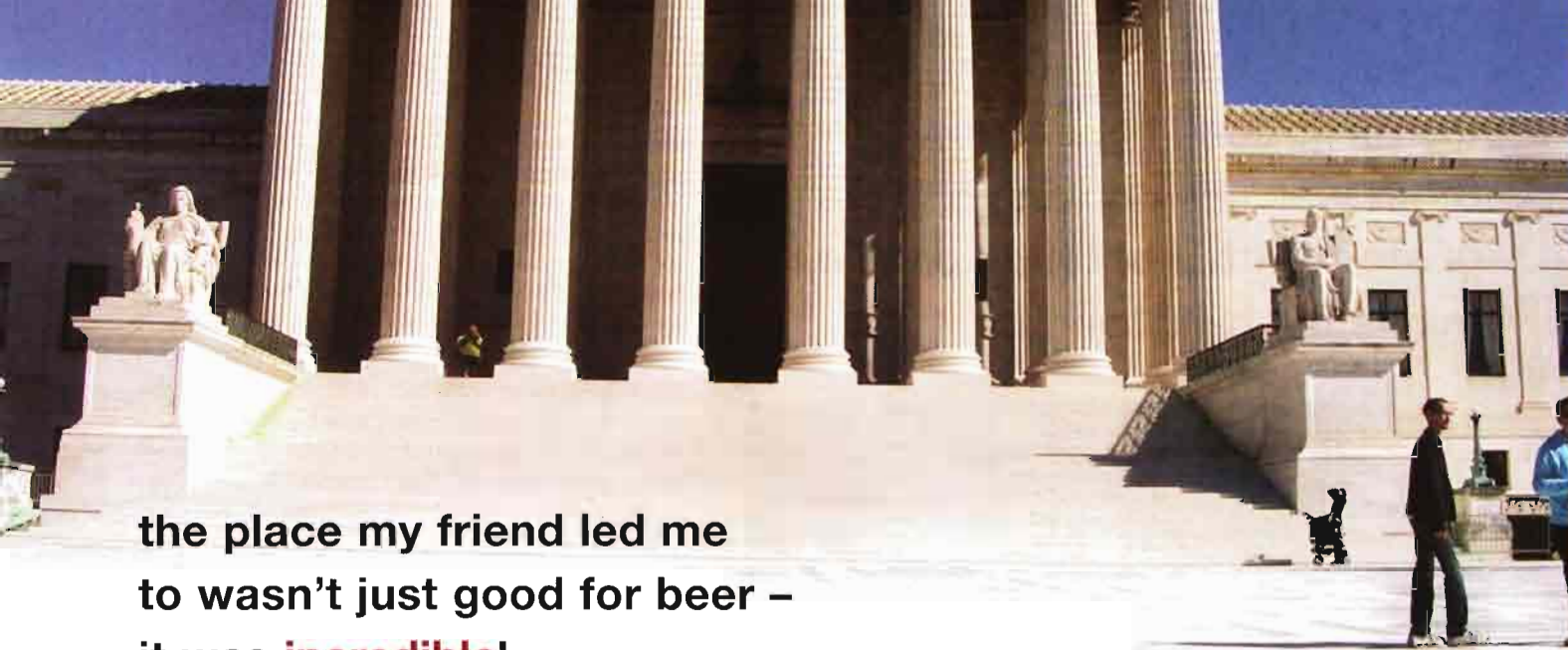
It was a great choice. Even at 10:00pm on a Thursday night, the place was packed with people enjoying big plates of pasta, pork chops and burgers. And while most of the beer on tap were unin-

spiring big brands, when the waiter offered something called Shock Top, I took a risk. It turned out to be a Belgian White ale, and not half bad either. Only later, when I googled the name, did I learn that it is brewed by Michelob. It was better than I would have expected a Michelob beer to be, certainly better than Rickard's White, which I mention in comparison since that is another big brewery's attempt to brew a craft-style beer.

After barely managing to finish Stan's enormous and excellent burger, I waddled back to the hotel just in time for last call at the bar. I was surprised to find two interesting beers on tap: an IPA and a Hofbräu Oktoberfestbier (from Munich). I picked the IPA and then had to smile when it turned out to be from Redhook Brewery, which is located about two hours south of my Vancouver home in suburban Seattle. It was delicious, but it was anything but local. (I've since learned that Redhook also has an East Coast brewery, but it is in New Hampshire, which isn't very close to DC).



The Washington Monument as imagined by Joe Wiebe (foreground)



the place my friend led me to wasn't just good for beer – it was **incredible!**

Friday was spent in a day-long meeting, the reason for my trip. Afterwards, to my delight, it turned out our group was booked into a local brewpub for dinner that night. When I arrived outside the *Capitol City Brewing Company* that evening, I was confident it would offer my first real sampling of Washington beer culture. The place looked great. It was located in a renovated old Greyhound Bus Terminal and boasted soaring ceilings, a giant oval bar, lots of wood and brass fixtures, and all the appropriate brewing paraphernalia in plain sight.

If only the beer lived up to the look of the place. Capitol City Brewing Co.'s regular brews include a Kolsch, Pale Ale, Amber Ale and Porter. While other members of my party tried the Pale Ale, Amber and Kolsch, I went for the seasonal special brews. Unfortunately, the Oktoberfest beer was nothing special, and the Pumpkin Ale didn't do much to improve my opinion. I didn't try the regular brews, but my friends told me they were nothing to write home about either. Too bad. I can only imagine the mistaken marketing logic behind putting so much effort into selling a place as a brewpub and then offering such uninteresting beer.

Luckily, one of my dinner-mates thought he knew of another good place to drink beer, so we left Capitol City Brewing behind and walked a few blocks east towards the Penn Quarter/Old Downtown neighbourhood, which is now an entertainment district with a busy strip of bars, shops and restaurants lining 7th Street NW.

The place my friend led me to wasn't just good for beer – it was incredible! RFD, or *Regional Food and Drink*, stocks hundreds of different beers, including over 300 in bottles and 40 on tap at any given time. Stunned by the sheer magnitude of the options available to me I didn't know where to begin, so my guide ordered me a Yuengling Traditional Lager. According to him, this is the best beer on the East Coast. It was delicious – amber and medium-bodied with a nice hop bite. Dating back to 1829, Yuengling (pronounced ying-ling) calls itself America's Oldest Brewery, and managed to survive Prohibition by brewing near beer and operating a dairy.

But after that I wanted to try some of the more unusual options available on tap. I started with the cask-conditioned Flying Dog

Snake Dog IPA. It turns out Flying Dog Brewery is based in Frederick, Maryland, about 80km (50 miles) northwest of Washington, so it is pretty much a local brew. The beer was memorable – rich and delicious with a pungent hoppy nose reminiscent of fresh-hopped beers.

I followed that with an actual fresh-hopped beer – Harpoon Glacier Harvest Wet Hop 2010 – but, curiously, it didn't offer much of a hop aroma at all. It tasted fine, but without that hoppy aroma it seemed two-dimensional in comparison to the Snake Dog IPA. Harpoon Brewing is a New England brewery and the Glacier Harvest Wet Hop Ale is #33 in its 100 Barrel Series of limited edition specialty brews.



Hockey Night in DC, Capitals fans invade RFD

After this, my friends decided to head home, but the night was still young according to my body clock, which was still set on Vancouver time. I decided to check out the *District Chop House*, a place I'd read about which was only a few blocks south – and am I ever glad I did. As with Capitol City Brewing, it was love at first sight. The brewpub is housed in a beautifully renovated turn of the century bank building with a vaulted ceiling supported by huge pillars. Most of the tables were taken when I walked in, but luckily I found an empty stool at the bar, right in front of the beer taps, which turned out to be rather fortuitous since it allowed me to chat with the bartender as he filled orders.

the cask-conditioned Bourbon Stout was like drinking a glass of stout with a bourbon chaser, minus the hangover...



above: Brickskeller below: DC Chophouse

This time, the beer lived up to the image. In fact, it was far better than I'd even hoped. Upon learning that I was writing a story about DC beer culture, the friendly bartender poured me samples of each of the Chop House's brews. I can honestly say there wasn't a weak option among them. And the ones that stood out were excellent.

Best among them were the delicious Dunkelweizen and the Bourbon Stout, which was cask-conditioned in Woodford Reserve (Kentucky) bourbon barrels – like drinking a glass of stout with a bourbon chaser, minus the hangover. I also liked the Oktoberfest lager, and enjoyed the fact that it was served in special half-size versions of the characteristic mass dimpled beer glasses used in

Munich's beer tents. Kudos to District's brewmaster, Barrett Lauer, for crafting such memorable brews.

I spent Saturday working up a big thirst on a self-guided walking tour of the city's monuments and memorials. I planned my tour to end in the Capitol Hill district where I hoped to find a couple more good places to drink beer. Several bars caught my eye, including *18th Amendment*, which styles itself as a Prohibition-era



speakeasy, and I finally stepped into Pour House, a sports bar/neighbourhood tavern. On draft was a mix of big brand standards and interesting craft beer options, such as Dogfish Head 60-Minute IPA, a couple of Samuel Adams brews, and Yuengling lager. I went with the New Holland Ich-abod Ale because it seemed like the most unusual choice. It was a delicious, spicy pumpkin ale, a perfect thirst-quencher on a crisp autumn day.

That evening I went to the Dupont Circle neighbourhood, just north of the White House. I took the Metro, and the escalator rising out of the Dupont Circle station had to be the longest one I've ever ridden (indeed, wikipedia informs that it is 57 metres or 188 feet long).

At street level, I found a charming and busy commercial district with a diverse mix of boutiques, galleries, bookstores, foreign embassies and ethnic restaurants extending northwest on Connecticut Ave NW. My destination was a few blocks west of the station.

Brickskeller, owned by the same folks as RFD, is a self-described "dining house and down-home saloon" situated in the basement of a five-story brownstone with an inn above it. Divided into several snug, brick-lined rooms, *Brickskeller's* cozy atmosphere is perfectly suited to whiling away the hours tasting beers from around the world. And with more than 1000 beers in bottles on hand, one could easily spend a lot of hours there. They also offer basic pub grub to help soak up the suds.

The saloon has been open since 1957 and claims to have served over 35 million beers over that time, including more than 6000 different individual brands! The menu is a photocopied booklet with a beer list spanning ten pages with two columns in fine print on each page, all divided by country of origin – from Argentina to Wales. There is even a full page of toasts from around the world. There is no draft beer, but the bar in the inn's restaurant upstairs serves cask-conditioned beer using an authentic Scottish hand-pull system.

Alas, I could only try a few beers at *Brickskeller* before heading back to my hotel where bed and an early flight beckoned the next morning. One thing I knew as I rode that long escalator back down to the Metro was that I definitely wanted to come back for more some time.

- BIERGARTEN HAUS** 1355 H Street NE biergartenhaus.com
- BRASSERIE BECK** 1101 K Street NW beckdc.com
- BRICKSKELLER** 1523 22nd Street NW brickskeller.org
- CAPITOL CITY BREWING COMPANY** Downtown: 1100 New York Ave NW, Capitol Hill: 2 Massachusetts Ave NE capitolcitybrew.com
- CHURCH KEY** 1337 14th Street NW churchkeydc.com
- DISTRICT CHOP HOUSE** 509 7th Street NW chophouse.com
- MERIDIAN PINT** 3400 11th Street NW meridianpint.com
- PIZZERIA PARADISO** Georgetown: 3282 M St NW, Dupont Circle: 2003 P St NW
- REGIONAL FOOD & DRINK (RFD)** 810 7th Street NW lovethebeer.com