

BEDELL ON BEER

Ale and Farewell

By Tom Bedell

I'm not too sure who Fred Fincken was, or possibly still is. But I have a bottle of Ballantine Burton Ale "Brewed especially for Fred Fincken" on May 12, 1946, sitting on my desk. It's still full, and I'm seriously thinking about drinking it, not so much in tribute to Fred, but to Alan D. Eames.

It's a bit odd to say goodbye while saying hello, but that's life, and in this case, death. I'm unfortunately forced by the untimely passing of Eames to introduce this periodic column about the world of beer by raising a glass in farewell.

Eames died February 10 at his home in Dummerston of respiratory failure. Though a heavy smoker, suffering from sleep apnea, he seemed otherwise healthy, and a mere 59. All sad enough, particularly for family and friends left behind.

The world of beer has lost one of its supreme characters and chroniclers, long ago dubbed "The Beer King" by the *Boston Globe*, a title Eames liked so much he had it tattooed on his arm around a image he had pulled from a 120-year-old wine merchant's catalog, of a barrel wreathed in hops.

Later in life, after various trips to South American and Africa in search of indigenous beers, Eames was dubbed "The Indiana Jones of Beer," and he played that image to the hilt, too, since as he once freely admitted to me, he was also something of the P.T. Barnum of beer: "I'm in every sense a promoter."

A New Englander by birth, Eames was the son of an anthropologist, and he would eventually be drawn that way as well, if in the service of beer. As he put it in his 1995 book, *The Secret Life of Beer* (Storey Publishing), he had his beer epiphany in the summer of his fourteenth year, while drinking a six-ounce bottle of Ballantine's India Pale Ale: "The...strong, bitter, spruce forest taste...moved me. My life changed forever. My fate was sealed. That first soft kiss of malt and hops against my lips was my first step into a world I couldn't imagine then, a journey that would take me, beer glass in hand, to some of the least traveled, most remote places on earth."

I can't point to such a single thunderbolt of beer enlightenment, as much as an extended cross-country trip I took with a friend after graduating from college back in the '70s. It was the proverbial Search for America, we told everyone. In retrospect, I believe it was more a Search for America's Beers.

There was still a plethora of regional breweries then, though they were in the process of vanishing--Pearl Brewing in Texas, Olympia in the northwest, Narragansett in Rhode Island or, indeed, Ballantine from Newark, New Jersey. I'd had my fill of bland, mass market suds in college anyway. The trip created the unquenchable thirst to find something different--the obscure, the regional, the more flavorful.

Which is exactly what Eames was stocking on the shelves of Gleason's Package Store in Templeton, Massachusetts, when he took it over in the mid-'70s, just about the time when the American brewing industry was at its nadir, down to a puny forty-some

breweries, and most of those producing similar watery lagers. In the world of brewing, the United States was a laughable entry.

It's different now. From early efforts like Eames'--which he parlayed into Three Dollar Dewey's Ale House, established first in Portland, Maine, and then in Brattleboro (the forerunner to McNeil's Brewery)--others began to seek out more exotic pints, something beyond the usual belly-wash.

The microbrewery and brewpub culture drove the change, and from the mid-1970's to now the U.S. refashioned itself into the most diverse brewing nation in the world, the palate of flavors and choice of styles almost dizzying in its sheer variety.

Like Eames, I began turning my interest into a professional pursuit, and we ultimately shared some credits--contributors to *The Encyclopedia of Beer* (Henry Holt, 1995), members of the North America Guild of Beer Writers. Our vocational paths would cross periodically, as well as the serendipitous sidewalk or supermarket meetings in Brattleboro.

But before my wife and I moved to Vermont, I received a call from Eames one day saying I should take a drive up to Brattleboro from New York, so that we could go taste an extremely rare beer, one produced only twice in Ballantine's history, a Burton Ale brewed in 1946 and then barrel-aged for twenty years.

Sounded good to me. Off Lynn and I went, three and a half-hours to Brattleboro. When we arrived, Eames told me the tasting would be in Stowe, two and a half hours north, and that he didn't drive.

This didn't sound as good, but there was that Burton Ale at the end (or mid-point) of the drive, and I quickly found that I was in no danger of dozing during the five hour round-trip to Stowe. Once rolling, Eames was a one-man anecdotal band. His barbed wit bit some and irritated others. Mostly, I found it vastly entertaining; I'm not sure if I stopped laughing the entire time.

At The Shed Restaurant in Stowe we indeed plowed through several bottles of the beer, these "Brewed especially for Silvio Semprebbon." Actually, it was from the exact same batch as the bottle for Fred Fincken now sitting on my desk.

I know I must have taken some notes of the day, but it was sixteen years ago, I can't find them, and Eames is no longer here to shore up my memory. But I believe he would have reminded me that we drank the bottles with Silvio himself, or a close relative. I have no trouble remembering that the beer, then 45 years old, was still appealing, and remarkably free of the defects of age.

Would that we could say the same. But Godspeed, Alan. For that matter, Godspeed Fred, and Godspeed Silvio.

As for the rest of us, we'll continue the journey, beer glass in hand.

###

Tom Bedell, of Williamsville, Vermont, will write an occasional beer column for *The Commons*. Contact him at bedell@svcable.net.