

Holiday beers, yum

In My Glass

By Rob Kasper

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For beer drinkers, this is going to be an espresso Christmas. Many of the best-tasting brews I sampled in the crop of 2006 winter beers had distinct coffee and chocolate notes. Yet they still tasted like beer.

This happy combination of flavors is a gift from brewers who traditionally bring rich, sometimes-spicy beers to market at this time of year. Perhaps "gift" is too strong a word because these holiday brews do cost anywhere from \$7 a six-pack - the price tag for Snow Goose Winter Ale and Otter Creek Alpine Ale, two favorites of a panel that recently sampled 34 winter brews - to \$14 for a champagne-size bottle of Sint Pieters Zinnebir, a pick from Belgium.

The theme of these beers is more. More malt, more hops and a special ingredient or two from the brewer's bag of tricks.

The Tommyknocker Winter Warmer, for example, adds cocoa powder and honey to the mix. I could easily envision sipping one of these beers after a hard day of stringing the holiday lights or fetching the Christmas tree.

Along with the extra ingredients, these beers come with higher alcohol levels, up to 12 percent in the Scaldis Noel. A long winter's nap might be a better post-sipping activity than penning Christmas cards.

The winter brews, 34 total, were divided into three categories - American, English and Belgian - and sampled blind by a panel of six tasters.

The top vote-getter among the Americans was a local brew, **Clipper City Winter Storm**, a marvelous balanced blend of rich malt and crisp hops. It was closely followed in the voting by Brooklyn Black Chocolate Stout, a dark, rich six-malt indulgent delight.

Our favorites among the English winters were Ridgeway Criminally Bad Elf, a potent barleywine, and Ridgeway Very Bad Elf, a "lovely" reserve ale. Given their clever names, these 16.9-ounce bottles would make ideal stocking stuffers or gifts to a boss who is about to do a "perp walk."

The beers from Belgium wowed the panel. Somehow Belgian brewers can extract an incredible array of flavors from their brew kettles. They are also very big on Christmas. No Happy Holidays on these labels. Instead we see Santa on his sleigh. And the label of the Scaldis Noel, a brew with a sweet and amazing mix of complex maltiness and anise, has a label that glitters more than a house on 34th Street in Hampden.

The Top Choices

American brews

BEST AMERICAN

Clipper City Winter Storm: Baltimore. \$8.49 a six-pack. Marvelously balanced blend of rich malt and crisp hops.

BEST BARGAIN

Snow Goose Winter Ale: Frederick. \$6.99 a sixpack. A terrific "piney" aroma and a dazzling finish.

OTHER FAVES

Brooklyn Black Chocolate Stout: Brooklyn, N.Y. \$8.99 a six-pack. Chocolate in a beer bottle, a six-malt indulgent delight.
Tommyknocker Cocoa Porter Winter Warmer: Idaho Springs, Colo. \$8.99 a six-pack. With cocoa powder and honey in this dark brew, it is almost dessert.

Otter Creek Alpine Ale: Middlebury, Vt. \$6.99 a six-pack. Crisp caramel notes in this malty ale that claims to be the perfect apres-ski brew.

English brews

Ridgeway Criminally Bad Elf: Oxfordshire. \$6.99 for a 16.9-ounce bottle. A big, 10.5 percent alcohol barleywine-style ale.
Ridgeway Very Bad Elf: Oxfordshire. \$4.99 for a 16.9-ounce bottle. A "lovely" ale on its best behavior.

Belgian brews

Scaldis Noel: Brasserie Dubuisson Freres. \$3.99 for an 8-ounce bottle. Sweet and amazing, a red ale with complex maltiness and a hint of licorice in a glittering bottle.

Gouden Carolus Noel: Brewery Het Anker. \$10 for a 750-milliliter bottle. Copper-colored, high-gravity ale with anise notes.

Zinnebir Xmas: Sint Pieters Brewery. \$13.99 for a 750-milliliter bottle. This rich, handcrafted ale from a small brewery has flickers of chocolate and coffee.

Panel members were Hugh Sisson, head of Clipper City Brewing Co. and co-host of the "Cellar Notes" radio show on WYPR; Brian Leonard and Tim Hillman of the Wine Source, the Hampden liquor store that organized the tasting; Mary Zajac, a columnist for Style and Edible Chesapeake magazines; her husband, Kevin Gardner, a veteran beer taster, and myself.