

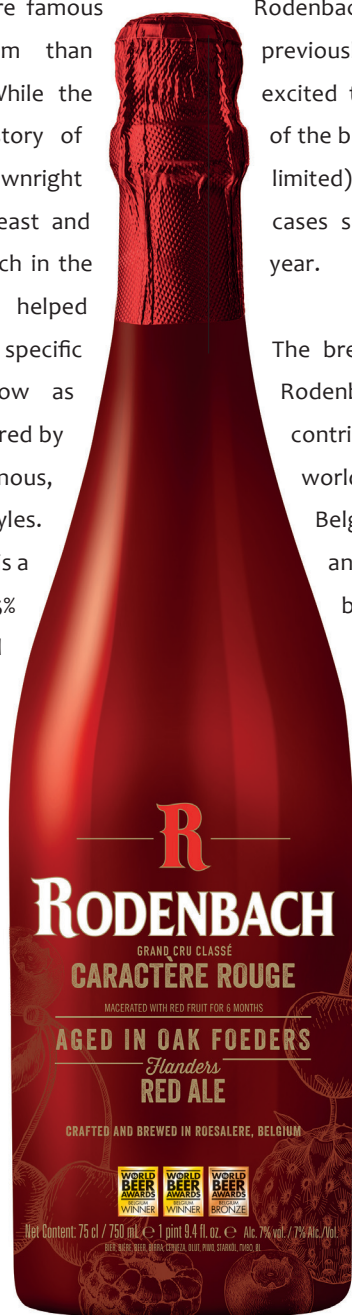
The RARE BEER CLUB

BROUWERIJ RODENBACH
ROESELARE, WEST FLANDERS, BELGIUM

CARACTÈRE ROUGE

There is perhaps no more famous brewery in all Belgium than Brouwerij Rodenbach. While the country has a long history of brewing both tart and downright sour beers using wild yeast and bacteria, it was Rodenbach in the late 19th century that helped pioneer and define the specific style of beer we know as Flanders Red Ale, considered by many to be the most vinous, or wine-like, of all beer styles. The standard Rodenbach is a blend of approximately 75% fresh and 25% 2-year aged ale, while Rodenbach Grand Cru incorporates much more aged beer (approx. 66%). The Caractère Rouge we bring you this month starts as 100% 2-year aged ale, which then undergoes a 6-month maceration with fresh cherries, raspberries, and cranberries.

We've been able to get our members



Rodenbach Grand Cru and Vintage previously, and we are even more excited to offer Caractère Rouge, one of the brewery's most exceptional (and limited) offerings—with less than 500 cases sold throughout the U.S. each year.

The brewery bears the name of the Rodenbach family, who not only contributed their unique beer to the world but also helped contribute Belgium to the world, at least as an independent country. The brewery was founded in 1821 by Rodenbach brothers Pedro, Alexander, Ferdinand, and Constantijn. All four played critical roles in the Belgian Revolution of 1830, which led to the secession of Belgium from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. In fact, when Leopold I greeted the crowd from the balcony of the House of the Nation after being crowned king, Alexander (who ran the brewery from 1821 to 1836, and happened to be blind) appeared at his side.

In 1878, Pedro's grandson Eugène became manager of the family brewery. From a brewing perspective, as opposed to a political one, Eugène is certainly the most influential Rodenbach in the family line. During his travels to southern England, he was exposed to, and learned much about, the early porter beers popular in London at the time. In the 19th century, these early porters were typically aged for at least several months in giant barrels where they matured and acidified. Eugène took what he learned and applied it at home in Belgium, developing and refining the technique, and creating the style of Rodenbach beers we know today.

Rodenbach's red ales undergo a primary

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SPECIFICATIONS

Style

Oak-Aged Sour Ale w/ Cherries, Raspberries, and Cranberries

Alcohol By Volume

7%

Serving Temperature

43-50° F

Suggested Glassware

Tulip, Teku, Flute, or Pinot Glass

and a secondary fermentation, with both yeast and lactobacillus bacteria, creating beer with a distinctively acidic, sour quality. However, it's when the beers enter the maturation stage that the fun really begins. The beer is aged in huge oak barrels known as "foeders" in Flemish ("foudres" in French), some of which are older than 150 years. Of these impressive foeders, Rare Beer Club founder Michael Jackson earlier wrote, "Rodenbach, in Roeselare, has ten or eleven halls full of these tuns. There is nothing comparable in any brewery elsewhere in the world, and the whole establishment is a temple of industrial archaeology."

CARACTÈRE ROUGE

The exclusive RODENBACH Caractère Rouge, with an alcohol content of 7%, is the result of a 6-month maceration with fresh fruit (sour cherries, raspberries and cranberries) of RODENBACH Vintage Ale, which matured in oak casks for 2 years. After its maceration, the beer is re-fermented in the bottle. ... This beer evokes the delicacy and experience of a fresh Burgundy wine. – Caractère Rouge release notes

Less than 500 cases of Rodenbach's Caractère Rouge are sold annually in the U.S., and we've got a substantial portion of that allocation set aside for our Rare Beer Club members.

We would take this over fresh Burgundy. While there are certainly exceptions to the rule that the land of fruit beer tends to be ruled by the sour, bright acidity really does work beautifully alongside fresh-fruit notes. We are much more likely to be satiated by a sour peach beer than a peach beer. And,

exceptions aside, we were just floored by how well the vibrant sourness here supports a huge abundance of juicy red fruits.

The appearance of this beer, though—and despite the number of times we're inclined to use the word "fruit" in the following paragraphs—kind of gives a better sense of what this beer's about: this is more ruby and caramel and barrel-brown than fruit-pop red, or anything along those lines. Modest head formation. This does give a berry-color glow at certain angles. The firm, off-white/light-pink foam lingers for a while at the edges, with well-structured lacing.

The berries make the aroma on this pop. The combination, and aspects of the color, kept us thinking strawberries, but you can also kind of pick out each of the noted additions: the tang of cranberry, the deep purple of raspberries, that familiar cherry. There are darker fruits, plus leather, a relatively soft influence from the years in oak—and a plush, mouthwatering acidity.

We love how the fruit character on this beer is just massive and still backed up by a generous degree of structure and barrel influence. The cherries were first to register, then cranberries, while raspberries, at least as we were tasting things, basically took the wheel mid-palate. The tongue gets a nice zestiness of bubbles and acidity—certainly sour, but very welcoming.

While the berries play out no problem, the overall effect isn't a berry. It's more fruit leather, like Fruit Roll-Ups but good ones, a combination of the fresh-fruit additions, an underlying layer of barrel character (toasty oak, an edge of tannins, some rounding vanilla), and various aged notes playing out

between them: caramel, sherry, a variety of vinous qualities to support the earlier Burgundy comparison. Deeper still, we found hints of peppery spice and almonds.

AGING & PAIRING NOTES:

The brewery puts a best-by date on Caractère Rouge of about three years out, and it certainly feels like a cellar-worthy choice to us. Watch out for how the fruit dissipates and the caramel ramps up. In considering pairings, the overall structure of this beer is sort of like elements of balsamic vinegar and strawberry: which had us thinking of bitter greens, and creamy cheeses.

ENJOY YOUR RODENBACH OAK FOEDER BOTTLE OPENER!

So we'd like to think that being a member of The Rare Beer Club has some pretty cool perks. Certainly getting beers crafted exclusively for our members from breweries like Lost Abbey, Jolly Pumpkin and The Bruery is a sweet part of being in the club, but this month, we've got something really cool for you. The bottle opener included in this month's shipment was made from one of Rodenbach's 294 oak foeders. Each foeder is crafted from 150-year old French oak and used for 150 years before being retired. You're holding a bit of history in your hand compliments of Rodenbach and The Rare Beer Club. Prost! Kris

The RARE BEER CLUB



ROWLEY FARMHOUSE ALES SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

THE SMOKING SWEDE RARE BEER CLUB EXCLUSIVE

Rowley Farmhouse Ales down in Santa Fe hit our radars pretty recently, having opened in 2016. But the funky farmhouse ales and sour concoctions these folks have been putting out have been quickly making them a name in the wider beer world. Rowley brewed something special for us this month—a rare Gotlandsdricka, inspired by the historic Scandinavian beer style—and pretty much pulled out all the stops in creating this one, as some of the necessary ingredients can take some doing... Rowley is headed up on the beer side by brewmaster John Rowley, who’s worked as a lab scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory for the previous dozen-plus years, picking up 80+ regional and national brewing awards along the way. We’re thrilled to be able to get this brewer’s work into the hands of our Rare Beer Club members.

We’ll let Rowley introduce The Smoking Swede, as well as his methods for creating it:

“The Smoking Swede is an interpretation of Gotlandsdricka, an indigenous farmhouse ale brewed on the island of Gotland. The small island of Gotland is 40 miles or so off the coast of Sweden in the Baltic Sea. Since the Viking age, this beer has been continually brewed

on Gotland, often in small wooden mash tuns called rostbunns. A main component to this style involves the use of juniper, and since we have no shortage of local juniper in and around Santa Fe, we foraged our own local boughs and berries to be used in the brewing of our version. We also used birch smoked malts, that our good friend Tobias smoked for us up in the hills in the Jemez wilderness. Typically one might choose a harder wood in the US, but we wanted to be true to style as much as possible.

“Besides the birch smoked malt, the grain bill for this beer consists of a large portion of rye, raw wheat and naked oats. We lightly hopped this to 22 IBUs using Russian Serebrianka hops, and fermented it using our house mixed culture. This beer was brewed exclusively for the Rare Beer Club and Pints for Prostates, an organization we stand behind wholeheartedly. It will only be available through the club, and we will also be pouring a gin-barrel-aged version during Denver Rare Beer 10 and at our tap room. Cheers! Or should we say Skål!”

THE SMOKING SWEDE

Let’s get a sense of what we’re digging into with this one. Gotlandsdricka is the indigenous beer of Gotland, Sweden’s largest island, located in the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Latvia. Similar in many respects to Finland’s native brew, sahti, this is a type of beer that typically relies on juniper—both berries and twigs—and is typically made in the home or farmhouse

according to traditional recipes. The name means “drink of Gotland” or translated further, “drink of the good land.” Both styles also tend to have rye and oats in addition to malted barley, and often use local herbs, and in the case of Gotlandsdricka, sometimes local honey. Though Gotland is a relatively small land mass (at about 30 miles wide by 100 miles north to south), due to local, often family-based recipes there is quite a wide interpretation of the style; one person’s homebrewed Gotlandsdricka is quite likely to taste very different than another’s. Unlike most sahtis, Gotlandsdricka tends to rely heavily on wood-smoked malts. In the days before brewers’ yeast was cultured, many Gotlanders used baker’s yeast, sometimes by way of actual bread loaves, or relied on wild yeasts and bacteria cultures residing on the juniper sticks used to stir the brew.

Today the population of the Gotland is approx. 57,000, and residents have much to boast of their cultural heritage. Human presence here

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SPECIFICATIONS

Style
Gotlandsdricka w/ birch-smoked malt
Alcohol By Volume
5.5%
Serving Temperature
48–55° F
Suggested Glassware
Nonic, Tulip, Teku, or Trusty Drinking Horn



predates history, with evidence of civilization dating back to at least the Stone Age, though perhaps the most enduring legacy is that of Viking culture and the middle ages. It's not clear when something resembling today's "average" Gotlandsdricka was first brewed (and truth be told, any native beer brewed there at any point would be, by definition, a Gotlandsdricka), but as is typical of insular cultures, most everything is sourced locally, and traditions endure a bit longer than is often seen on the mainland. Primitive, raw, wild beer, Gotlandsdricka is indeed a rare, traditional style.

This month, we're able to offer this special release from Rowley Farmhouse Ales as a Rare Beer Club exclusive offer. This beer will be sold through the club and the brewery's tasting room only, and it's one of the hardest-to-track-down beer styles we've featured in a while.

This pours a well-hazed, golden-orange color, capped by a moderate display of bubbles. As advertised, this feels like fresh, turbid, vibrantly yeasty beer. Gotlandsdricka and its intricate farmhouse brethren seem very much appropriate for a world in which hazy IPAs have risen to the top-entered category at the Great American Beer Festival (which happened this year). There's vibrant, sourdough-like tartness immediately apparent, refreshing and citrusy, spilling forth from the aromatics, conjuring fresh-baked bread, lightly tart lemons, and a hint of rye. The smoke is subtle but pervasive: birch-smoked malt, while of a different

sort of wood, had us thinking of the tightly wound smokiness of Lagavulin. And that's all just in the aromatics.

This beer is something else. The lightly tart core citrus and sourdough-like yeastiness form the foundation from the get-go, with a modest undercurrent of carbonation providing just enough lift. We've definitely never had anything quite like this beer before... That touch of rye adds a comforting warmth and spice, while the birch-smoked malt is exceptionally well integrated: super smooth, nothing close to the face-punch of lesser rauchbiers, and it works great alongside the other core notes here. (Not anything close to astringent, despite the firm smoke experience.) This old style might take a bit of time to get used to, with the wild yeast in addition to the core components of birch-smoked malt and juniper. The juniper offers up a nicely herbaceous, even spicy component throughout that had us thinking of sahti—but this also very much goes off in its own direction from that juniper-heavy style. That smoke and fruits and juniper grow more rounded with a little more time to warm up. As one of the very limited number of opportunities to try this historic Scandinavian style, this proved to be surprisingly refreshing and complexly composed—at least in Rowley's contemporary take.

The birch-smoked malt component comes through most clearly at the far end of things, with a robust smoke profile that expands. (Much respect to Tobias, the smoker of

Rowley's birch-smoked malt.) The finish definitely brings everything into clearest view: delicious, toasty and dry, with a nice and nearly peaty smoke component adding further structure, and all sorts of complex tartness showing with a bit more time. Rowley presents Gotlandsdricka as a delicate balance of disparate elements: potent citrus, soft smoke, savory undercurrents (courtesy of both rye and wood contributions). This is very much a beer worth spending some time with: a conversation-inspiring combo of nontraditional smoke, funky yeast contributions, beyond-normal-bounds grain additions, herbaceous juniper... There's so much going on here. It's an odd, and highly uncommon, experience to be sipping Gotlandsdricka. We'd share this one.

AGING & PAIRING NOTES:

We'd generally encourage our Rare Beer Club members to dig into this one fresh. There's a vibrant combination of sourdough notes, subtle mineral bitterness, and delicate smoke that's prone to get more muddled over time. As far as pairings go: the combination of herbaceous juniper alongside bright citrus and smoke has us thinking of roasted chicken or pork sausage. That said, we could also see a creamier, smooth goat cheese fitting in as an ideal backdrop.

BEYOND THE BOTTLE: MORE ON GOTLANDSDRICKA

BY KEN WEAVER

One of the two featured RBC beers this month is styled as a Gotlandsdricka, a particularly out-there style from Sweden one doesn't see very often. It had me thinking of Finnish sahti, which shares the use of juniper, among other key details. Randy Mosher's *Radical Brewing* and Svante Ekelin's entry in *The Oxford Companion To Beer* are both good spots to start digging in.

The featured beer from Rowley Farmhouse Ales overcomes two of the main challenges in brewing authentically minded Gotlandsdricka: they foraged boughs of juniper from around their local Sante Fe region (these traditionally get preboiled and/or used to make a filtering base during lautering), and they acquired birch-smoked malt through a friend who happens to do things like that in the Jemez wilderness, outside of Sante Fe. That addition of a birch-smoked malt provides, as Mosher puts it, "a faint wintergreen tang." He includes a recipe for

Gotlandsdricka that includes traditional adds like bog bean, blessed thistle, and bog myrtle.

These beers have a lot going on. The only example I can recall trying off the top of my head was the Jester King Gotlandsdricka, many many years ago. Närke Kulturbryggeri makes one of the other examples that sees any significant availability. Jopen in the Netherlands and Off Color in Chicago both have their own versions. Though Mosher and others mentioned that Gotlandsdricka was very possibly the everyday drink of the Vikings (mead was reserved for fancier occasions), they'd have a tough time finding a steady supply of it today.

Ken Weaver (@KenWeaver) is a beer writer and cartoonist based in Petaluma, California. Check out his weekly post-apocalyptic beer comic at massivepotions.com.