

# The RARE BEER CLUB



## ATOM BREWING COMPANY ERIE, COLORADO

### STILL HERE (RBC EXCLUSIVE)

Atom Brewing Co. in Colorado got its start in November 2015, in the backyard of Jeff and Chris Porn—where it remains to this day. Jeff's been brewing for 18 years, Chris previously worked for White Labs, and together the couple's converted a 1920s carriage house on their property to be the home base of Atom Brewing. Jeff handled the rebuild and construction of the brewery himself, while Chris' experience with brewing yeasts served them well when they set up yeast captures all around the small brewery, finding nine viable native yeast strains that they then blended together—creating a house culture that forms the basis of all Atom beers.

Old-world methodologies are at the heart of Atom Brewing's core ethos. Their cedar-lined ceiling in the barrel house encourages

wild microflora, and all of their crucial equipment is wooden: from custom-made oak fermenters to the many hand-selected used barrels that they use for aging their beers. Their wort is typically brewed off-site at another brewery, with Jeff handling the brewing itself, then trucked back to the Atom carriage house/barrel room to be fermented and aged before release. The quickest beer they make takes around 8 months!

Each beer is open fermented, using one of the brewery's house yeast blends to incorporate the locally harvested Colorado yeast, before seeing extensive aging inside of (usually neutral) freshly emptied wine and spirit barrels. These provide the ideal environment for the various yeast and bacteria to do their slow-paced work

on the beer, resulting in the truly exceptional and unique releases we've been sampling from Atom. This month's feature in particular—a potent, deeply nuanced farmhouse imperial stout, with malted sunflower seeds—showcases that uniqueness and expressiveness of their core house character. In general, these beers are aged for a period of up to

3 years, and allowed to develop for as long as needed before they see a formal release. The Atom yeast culture is maintained batch to batch in-house, and each of their beers is unfiltered and packaged by hand. Atom Brewing is a 100%-wood(!) brewery, in fact, and every one of their beers gets barrel-aged and fermented with a mixed culture. It's a pretty intricate production process—in a brewing space that's only around 700 square feet.

For the very-very small batch experimental stuff, they recently had a custom 5-barrel copper kettle built (in addition to their copper coolship), which allows them to brew batches on-site: outside, and over a wood fire. Along with Pen Druid Brewing and Scratch Brewing, Atom is one of very few commercial U.S. breweries incorporating open wood fire

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### SPECIFICATIONS

**Style**  
Barrel-Aged Farmhouse Imperial  
Stout w/ Sunflower Seeds

**Alcohol By Volume**  
10.5%

**Serving Temperature**  
50–58° F

**Suggested Glassware**  
Snifter, Tulip, Chalice, or Pinot Glass

into their brewing, with these very-very small batches forming the basis of the brewery's spontaneous program. Jeff and Chris also maintain a 20' x 60' garden on their property, where they grow all sorts of different ingredients, such as mint, lemongrass, hyssop, pumpkins, raspberries, and rhubarb.

As you might imagine, Atom doesn't really have a flagship or set lineup of beers. The closest to a flagship they've got is Arlo, their mixed culture farmhouse ale that's light, crisp, and the perfect showcase for their open fermentation and oak-barrel aging. It's the only beer that the brewery makes on a regular basis. Atom's Harvest Series takes a base beer that's aged inside of barrels for 5 to 6 months and adds up to 3 pounds per gallon of fresh fruit, on which the beers gets aged for another 1–3 months before packaging. Releases have included Blueberry Harvest, Passion Fruit Harvest, and Yuzu Harvest. Stillness, the imperial stout that serves as the original basis of this month's featured Still Here, is aged in neutral oak barrels for around 6 months and intentionally packaged uncarbonated to best showcase the core flavors (hence its name!). Atom also has a Sour Series—using stuff like Zinfandel barrels and fresh peaches.

As you've likely already guessed: Atom Brewing's releases see very light distribution, and are generally confined to about 80 locations sprinkled throughout Colorado. (The brewery's also been experimenting with a light amount of distribution to Europe.) Atom's beers are usually one-offs, or at most once-per-year releases, and around 98% of their production is packaged in corked-and-caged bottles. They don't have a taproom, but keep an eye out for their tasty bottles should you be in Colorado anytime soon. Learn more at [atombrewingcompany.com](http://atombrewingcompany.com).

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## STILL HERE

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This month's featured offering from Atom Brewing Co. is an exclusive release between Atom, The Rare Beer Club, and Pints for Prostates. This is our 10th year doing a beer release in support of Pints for Prostates, and proceeds from every bottle sold go towards supporting the organization's outreach activities, raising awareness about prostate cancer through the language of beer. Bonus: sunflower seeds have been found to be good for prostate health!

Atom Brewing's Still Here is a barrel-aged imperial stout made with malted sunflower seeds, and it's a perfect encapsulation of what this small brewery's up to. Based off their previously made Stillness, this version swaps oats in favor of sunflower seeds, and is made with 100% Coloradan ingredients. Malts are sourced from Root Shoot Malting, Troubadour Maltings, and Colorado Malting Co., hops from Colorado are used exclusively, and the house culture of Atom uses local native yeasts sourced from different parts of the brewery's wee property. This beer was put into neutral, used red-wine barrels at the end of January and packaged into bottles seven months later, resulting in a super-smooth (and very Coloradan) imperial stout.

Still Here pours black as night, and mostly headless. This imperial stout is packaged without carbonation intentionally, and that lack of bubbles keeps head formation modest. Those rich aromatics of nutty, toasted and roasted malt character come through quite strong, alongside dense coffee and dark chocolate. Leather. Tobacco. A big, rich, Russian-style imperial stout.

There's a beautifully developed imperial

stout core here, with more subtle contributions via the time this beer spent in (relatively) neutral red-wine barrels. Lots of its expected chocolate and roasted qualities upfront, along with leather plus light nuttiness from its sunflower seeds. There's a touch of a tart-cherry bite at the perimeter of things, providing some very welcome acidity to the overall presentation—a combo of the native yeasts' contribution and that time spent in red-wine barrels—while subtle notes of oaky vanilla and a tannic structure appear as complementary notes from the mid-palate forward. There's a dry earthiness at the core from the beer's fermentation qualities, and this plays off brilliantly beside more conventional notes of roasted malts, chocolate, and coffee—taking this to a whole other level. This is one of the most intriguing imperial stouts we've tried, and a stellar showcase of Atom Brewing's talents.

### AGING & PAIRING NOTES:

Still Here is definitely formidable enough to spend some time developing in one's cellar, and the fact that it's unfiltered and unpasteurized further solidifies that point. Jeff mentioned that aged bottles of the Stillness actually developed some carbonation after some significant time in the cellar—though these beers aren't intended to be consumed as such. Expect that house yeast character to grow more assertive with time. For food pairings: look to an appropriately hefty option for main courses (e.g. steak, lamb), or pair it like a port with dessert or cigars.

# The RARE BEER CLUB

## BRASSERIE FANTÔME SOY, BELGIUM

### PISENLIT

There is a fermentation-friendly phantasm at work in one brewery in Soy, Belgium. Thankfully this ghost doesn't have any malicious intent, though she can get a bit wild when she decides to spike the brewer's recipes with a blend of secret herbs and spices. And she plays other tricks, like ensuring that the same beer is often radically different from batch to batch... She's even been known to convert stout to a Belgian strong dark ale. More of a prankster than poltergeist, her mischief is accented by her supernatural talent for creating some truly haunting spiced farmhouse beers. More evidence of her non-demonic demeanor is that she plays well with others, permitting human pal Dany Prignon to take most of the credit for these world class, award-winning beers (in exchange, of course, for having the brewery named after her).



Brasserie Fantôme (the Phantom Brewery) has come to represent unabashed creative freedom of expression, and earned itself a reputation for being, well, borderline insane. Between the ghost stories, the 'spirited' behavior of Monsieur Prignon, the wild variation from beer to beer, being exceptionally guarded about what spices have been used in the recipes, or experimenting to the point of acute eccentricity (mushroom beer anyone?), you can maybe understand why some people think there may be a madman involved. Hey, you know what they say, behind every good madman there's... a phantom.

Wait, we may have screwed that up... you get the idea. But it's not really the reputation for zany flare that has made Fantôme's beers highly sought after—it's the beer. Their namesake beer, Fantôme Saison, a golden brew of 8% alcohol by volume, was rated a perfect 10 in "The Beers of Wallonia," a worthwhile

read penned by authors John Woods and Keith Rigley. The brewer (either Dany or the phantom) uses local ingredients and herbs, such as dandelions found growing outside the brewery—as is the case for this month's featured offering—spicing their numerous farmhouse ale variants with such skill and panache that people have been taking notice since the brewery was founded in 1988.

But it's easy to throw a bunch of spice in a beer. Making it taste good, however, and bringing out the best elements of an unusual spice without crushing the beer's natural flavors or spooking the yeast into catatonia—that's the real magic and mystique in the Fantôme beers. To boot, these are some of the most freshly fruity beers found in Belgium—how "they" do it we really don't know—it really is almost

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### SPECIFICATIONS

**Style**

Strong Saison w/ Dandelions

**Alcohol By Volume**

8%

**Serving Temperature**

45–52° F

**Suggested Glassware**

Tulip, Teku, Goblet, or Chardonnay Glass

paranormal. Another odd conundrum is the fact that their beers aren't particularly well known, even within Belgium. But for those who have had the pleasure (or occasionally, the peril) of tasting Fantôme's concoctions, the experience is not soon forgotten. And that's another reason the name is quite apropos; Fantôme's beers are very difficult to track down, materializing only rarely. When we recently had the chance to capture the elusive Fantôme, we suited up like Ghostbusters, donned our proton packs, and zapped as much of the stuff as we could into our ghost traps. It's a risky business, but our members are worth it. To find out more information about the brewery, brush up on your French and head over to [www.fantome.be](http://www.fantome.be).

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## PISENILIT

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Dany almost never gives up the ingredients list to Fantôme releases, but at least we can say for sure that the brewery's Pissenlit features dandelions prominently. Each

spring, Dany and his team head out into the fields surrounding the brewery to pick fresh bushels of dandelions for this year's batch (*pissenlit* is French for 'dandelion'). To prep the flowers for brewing, the yellow tops are removed and dried in the sun, before being soaked in water for a few days. A secret blend of malts and hops are added into this dandelion "tea", and the final result is one of our very favorite of the charismatic, elusive beers of Brasserie Fantôme.

Fantôme's Pissenlit pours a bright, though well-hazed, golden-amber color, almost orange at times, capped by solid off-white foam with nice retention and strong lacing along the edges. The charismatic Fantôme yeast character is present immediately: vibrant citrus and fruit, lots of pepper and doughiness, and subtle acidity and funk. For Rare Beer Club members familiar with the beers of Brasserie Fantôme, you know what we're talking about. There's solid levels of carbonation here, lifting the texture of this delicious farmhouse saison,

and that firm core structure of hay and citrus and subtle sourdough funk sets the foundation for this beer. With a little more time in the glass, one catches the subtle earthiness of that dandelion addition: an herbal bit of flair that goes great with the rustic expressions of the rest. Lots of white pepper and fruity esters, with everything leading to a crispy and firmly dry finish. A delicious saison.

### AGING & PAIRING NOTES:

Pissenlit will continue to develop further funk and tartness with some cellaring time, though that impact from the dandelions will be most present early on. For food pairings: the combo of citrus, herbs, and pepper have us looking to lamb kabobs or a grilled pork chop.

## BEYOND THE BOTTLE: WHY HARD SELTZER? WHY NOT?

BY KEN WEAVER

Alright, one last swing at this trend before The Summer of Seltzer comes to its close. Shout out to the folks at the *San Francisco Chronicle* for recently doing the unenviable task of blind-tasting through 38 different varieties of hard seltzer in the name of science. Key finding: "In our professional opinion, there are some *not terrible* hard seltzers, but there are no actually good hard seltzers." That was pretty much my take after tasting through a couple dozen of them a few years back for work—and neither result's surprising. This has nothing to do with taste.

It's interesting to look at the responses to this coverage on the *Chronicle's* Insta page, which basically boils down to competing values: "Why don't you have tastebuds?" vs. "Why don't you like fun?" I don't have enough room to turn this into a sociology deep-dive (which also doesn't sound super fun), but I think it's interesting to think about where one fits into these annual summer drinking trends that all fade

pretty fast: hard root beer, frosé, aperol spritz...

For people excited by these Instagrammable trends (not me), it's partly about knowing about this new *thing*, about being up on a certain part of culture—and it's frankly not very different from riding the hazy-IPA train (def me), or pastry-stout blimp, or whatever's next in beer. It feels tribal, because it totally is. And I think it's particularly interesting to consider how these various competing values (flavor vs. how a beverage looks and feels, for example) figure into how the craft beer world's shaping up. I might even get around to sampling that black cherry White Claw this weekend (per recommendations...). I just can't imagine making a habit of it.

Ken Weaver (@KenWeaver) is a beer writer, editor and cartoonist based in Petaluma, California. He makes a weekly webcomic—about a *dysfunctional brewery/potion shop*—at [MassivePotions.com](http://MassivePotions.com).