



Lisa Kadane is a newspaper and magazine writer who likes to travel and partake in the destination's preferred tippie, whether it's rum, wine, a margarita or whisky sour. She's been sharing her thoughts on spirits and cocktails since 2010.

Pucker up for sour beer

The latest suds trend is fruity, refreshing and best for those who don't like beer

I tried my first sour beer by accident at Una Pizza + Wine in Calgary. I decided that a fruity, lambic-style beer from Belgium sounded about right for a late lunch on a hot day. It arrived in a bottle with its own little cork. I poured, sipped, and was in awe over the nuanced, cherry-leaning, tart-but-still-beery fluid. I was hooked.

I had stumbled upon my preferred beer style: sour (and preferably fruited). The original brewers from centuries ago probably chanced upon it as well. They stored their ale in barrels and—like milk sitting around at room temperature—naturally occurring bacteria caused it to sour as the beer aged.

"There's wasn't as much knowledge of microbiology back then, so a lot of beers did turn sour," confirms Bryce McBain, brewmaster for Halcyon Barrel House in Vankleek Hill, ON.

This natural process spells trouble for dairy, but if you're like me—a not-very-enthusiastic beer drinker who avoids bitter, hoppy brews—then purposefully using bacteria and yeast to sour and funk up beer as it ferments and ages (a process that traditionally takes months) is probably the best thing that's ever happened to it.

McBain thinks it's pretty great, too, and Halcyon Barrel House focuses almost exclusively on mixed fermentation, barrel-aged, wild and sour ales. The Echo Chamber, for example, is a pleasing mix of crisp, tart apple, light hop and beery fizz. The iconic Gravity Well, aged in red-wine barrels, is dark and malty, with notes of

plum, cherry and red wine that balance its sour soul. They're perfect for late-summer patio sipping.

Though sour beers are the latest taproom darlings, showing up in tasting rooms from Vancouver to Halifax, they've been around for centuries. The Belgians have perfected the process and their best-loved styles—lambics, Flanders reds and oud bruins—have become the benchmark by which other sours are judged.

As with most Euro-trends, North Americans have been slow to catch on. After decades of bland macro beer, craft brewers began to up the ante with darker ales, bitter IPAs and now sours.

"Sour beers were never popular in the Americas until recently and I think that has to do with the emergence of craft beer and craft brewers," concurs McBain, who first tried a Flanders red from Belgium 15 years ago and was smitten. "We were inspired by those beers and wanted to take a shot at making them ourselves."

The challenge of making beer in the Belgian farmhouse style also appealed to Mitchell Kehoe, brewmaster at Wild Ambition Brewing in Kelowna. Kehoe and partner Teresa Cashen opened the small brewery and tasting room in an industrial part of the city—just off the Okanagan Rail Trail—in late 2018 with the idea to make all of their beers mixed fermentation ales.

"I originally was a home brewer and I got into this style because I couldn't just walk down the street and get beers like these," says Kehoe.

Their barrel-aged red sour with cherries, called A Single Branch, is fermented in oak for five months before being re-fermented with sour cherries sourced from an orchard in nearby Oyama. The result is a cider-like beer, with crisp apple and cherry notes that balance the tart taste. Also approachable is Blending In, a bière de coupage with a dry hop that melds a cloudy, grapefruit-y sour with just a touch of beer's bitter taste.

"The response has been better than we expected," says Kehoe, though he admits with a laugh that a few customers have accused their beer of not actually being beer.

This happens a lot when people first try sour beer, says Benjamin Leon, co-founder of The Dandy Brewing Company in Calgary. "It's beer, but it's a whole new experience for beer," says Leon, who recommends one of Dandy's American-style kettle sours for customers who dislike beer—like the flagship Wild Sour Ale, a blonde kettle sour with appealing hopped grapefruit notes. Equally crushable is the Session Plum Sour, with a slightly tropical taste and hint of guava.

Leon points out that Dandy's sours are not made in the Belgian style. Created in stainless steel kettles, they sour quickly before fermentation in a process that takes days, not months or years. "We don't want to hide what we're doing," says Leon. "It's a very distinct style within the sour umbrella."

But no matter how breweries are making them, sours are here to stay.

Says Leon: "There are a lot of people out there that, now they know sour beer exists, it's their drink of choice." ●

FROM LEFT: COURTESY HALCYON BARREL HOUSE; BLAKE FORD; DANDY BREWING CO.

1 Gravity Well, Halcyon Barrel House: Sour, dark and malty, with plum, cherry and red wine notes, this beer might change your life.

2 A Single Branch, Wild Ambition Brewing: Dry and sour, with apple and cherry flavours at the fore, this fruited sour is perfect for patio season.

3 Wild Sour Ale, The Dandy Brewing Company: Sour, funky and hoppy, you'll taste grapefruit and hints of white wine in this Dandy classic.



TRY THESE SOUR BEERS