

New ales hop to top

NZ's beer festival was a showcase for the best in innovative brewing.

THOSE Kiwis sure know how to throw a beer bash. The offerings at BrewNZ, held over a week in Wellington, ranged from weird to wonderful, including two brews made from feijoas, a South American fruit now widely grown in New Zealand. Other beers used the native manuka bush in interesting ways, one tasty stout was infused with clams and a pair of porters were matured in ex-pinot noir barrels.

Some innovations weren't entirely successful. The feijoa, in particular, has such a singular flavour the response is to either love or loathe it. It's surprising there was no kiwifruit beer on offer, as it's a fruit with much broader flavour appeal.

The highlight of the week was the final two-day Beervana event where the public tasted beers from 50-odd breweries and attended seminars in Wellington's gracious old town hall. I reckon we could learn a thing or two from our trans-Tasman cousins. Similar events in Australia inevitably involve plastic drinking receptacles and a coupon or ticketing system for beer samples. At Beervana you simply buy a NZ\$25 (\$20) entry ticket, collect a real glass and buy half or full measures from the exhibitors.

One stand-out for an unusual local flavour was Emerson's Southern Clam Stout, a one-off winter brew where master brewer Richard Emerson used 20 kilograms of clams – shells and all – in the 1200-litre batch of stout. Only the merest hint of brine was detectable in the otherwise excellent oatmeal stout.

One of the most-awarded craft brewers on either side of the Tasman, Emerson collected four individual trophies at this

year's BrewNZ awards, including the ultimate NZ Champion Brewery. Despite being profoundly deaf, Emerson gave an inspirational speech: "You've got to be passionate about making great beer and you've got to work really hard but always think about your customers."

Other distinctive beers included Captain Cooker from the Mussel Inn, which used freshly picked tips of manuka in a similar way to hops, giving the ale a pronounced astringency that works rather well.

In another twist, manuka bush is used to smoke a portion of malted barley in the production of Smokin' Bishop from the Invercargill Brewery. The beer is brewed in the style of a dark bock but with a distinctly smoky-bacon character reminiscent of Rauchbier from Bamberg in Germany. The rich, smoky palate takes some getting used to and probably needs to be matched with hearty food like kassler or kransky.

Both the Hallertau Barrel Aged Porter and Dux Pinot Barrel Aged Porter were successful marriages of grain and grape, where the tannins and fruity characters of the wine barrel enhance the roasty beer.

Australia had a solid representation at BrewNZ, making up half the judging panel with Brad Rogers (Stone & Wood, NSW), Brendan Varis (Feral, WA), Jayne Lewis (Mountain Goat, Victoria), Alex Troncoso (Little Creatures, WA), Lachlan McBean (formerly Bluetongue, NSW) and Richard Watkins (Wig & Pen, ACT), plus associate judge Paul Mercurio from Victoria.

At a "malt versus grape" themed dinner, five courses were matched with a single beer and wine, with diners awarding scores for each match. While it was reasonably informal, the highest-scoring match on the night was Stone & Wood Draught Ale with prawn and scallop wrapped in pancetta over leek puree and tamarind chutney.

TASTING NOTES

EMERSON'S PILSNER

Made with organic ingredients, this beer still ticks most boxes in the Czech style with honey-ish malt, spicy hop aromas, good complexity and a lingering after-bitterness. Sold at The Local Taphouse, Darlinghurst; Platinum Liquor, North Strathfield and Bellevue Hill.

EMERSON'S 1812 INDIA PALE ALE

The robust hop bitterness has been toned down, which helps promote the marmalade and toffee characters.

MONTEITH'S PILSNER

It may be a rung or two below the benchmark set by Emerson's but this flavoursome and hoppy lager, pictured, is a sound interpretation from the large DB Breweries. Available in NSW.

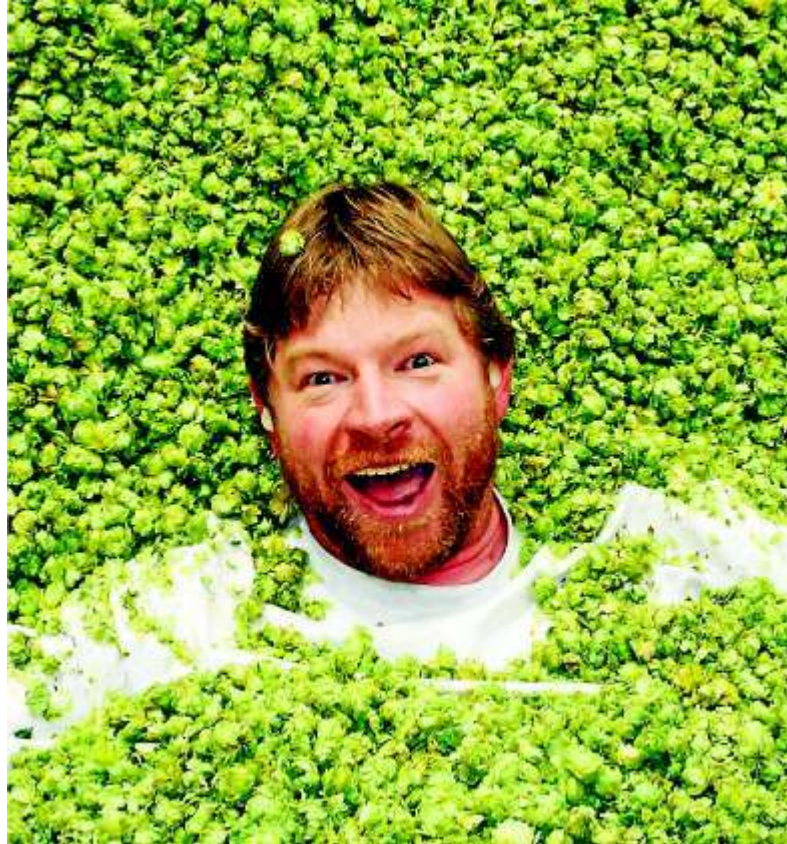


TUATARA HEFE

One of New Zealand's best wheat brews shows hints of banana, vanilla, cloves and tropical fruit and a suitably quenching finish. This beer is coming soon to Sydney.



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Happy as a clam ... award winner Richard Emerson