

ITALIAN BEERS FEATURED AT NEW MONTRÉAL FESTIVAL

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I was standing in the Windsor hotel this weekend with a slice of Italian Piave DOP cheese in one hand, and a glass of beer in the other thinking: is this really a recommended match? The beer in question, *Re Ale*, was brewed in Rieti Italy, one of 17 Italian beers imported especially for the *Flaveurs, Bières et Caprices* festival in Montréal last weekend, and it does indeed taste great alongside Piave cheese.

The *Flaveurs Bières et Caprices* festival celebrates pairing food with beer. Most people were quite surprised to hear that the featured country, for the first edition of the festival this year, was Italy. Well-known as a grape growing nation, Italy's culture and food has always been closely knit to wine. Although Italians don't drink as much beer per capita as some other European countries, statistics show that beer consumption in Italy has been growing steadily since 1999. The young city crowd (18-24 year-olds) has been turning to beer as a more approachable, fun beverage for a night on the town. Because there were only a few craft breweries in Italy in 1999, this increased demand was initially met by a flood of imported beer. The imports were very popular because they were, for the most part, much more flavourful than the local mega-brands. Inspired by these new flavours, a number of new Italian craft breweries started sprouting up throughout the country. According to Tony Forder, one of the speakers at the Montréal festival, there are now approximately 180 craft breweries in Italy.

Forder attributes the exceptionally rapid growth of craft beer in Italy to the Slow Food movement, which has taken the craft brewers under its wing. The Slow Food movement was started in Italy in the late eighties to resist the invasion of fast-food chains and mass-produced foods. It has many goals, mostly centered around celebrating and preserving local culinary traditions. Craft beer is best defined as beer that is made in small batches using traditional methods. It therefore comes as no surprise that the Slow Food movement should champion them as an alternative to mass-produced megabrands. The Slow Food movement has also provided inspiration for the Italian craft brewers, who often use ancient traditional grains to introduce rich distinctive flavours into their beer.

The three Italian craft breweries featured at the *Flaveurs, Bières et Caprices* festival had some interesting beers to offer. The most creative of the three breweries present was *Birra del Borgo*. Their *Castagnale* beer was brewed using chestnuts, resulting in an amber beer with honey flavours as well as a distinct chestnut aftertaste. They also offered a tobacco-infused dark beer, and a beer flavoured with Chinese tea. This last beer, simply called *Te*, was designed through a collaboration with a famous chef, Gino Pesce, who was looking for a beer that would complement raw fish. The other two craft breweries at the festival, B.A.B.B. and Piccolo Birrificio also offered some nice beers, showing some influence from the slow food movement. Alba beer (B.A.B.B.), had a rich bready flavour, and was brewed using *monococco*, a grain that has recently been reintroduced in the Italian Alps to make low-gluten bread and pasta.

It is fun to discover the exceptional craft beers being brewed in Italy. The festival *Flaveurs, Bières et Caprices* will certainly feature a different country next year, but the good news is that there will be 7-10 Italian breweries featured at the spring beer festival in Montréal: *Le Mondial de la Bière* (running May 28th to June 1st, 2008).

