

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL HANCOCK

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**There is a Wheat beer boom going on** in Toronto this year. In addition to the introduction of Rickard's White to the market, 5 local microbreweries have released a wheat beer in the past few months, with at least one more slated for the fall. While many Torontonians are just now discovering the joy of wheat beer, craft-beer fans in the area have been savouring one of the most stylistically accurate, and consistently good German-style wheat beers on the Canadian market for years. The beer in question is, of course, Denison's Weiss.

Denison's has been rated the #1 German Hefeweizen in the World on ratebeer since 2002. Unlike Wit (Belgian-style wheat) beer, Denison's is brewed without coriander or orange peel. Its flavour is a perfect balance between a warm "breadly" malt character, a lemon-like acidity (accentuated by carbonic bite), and banana (from the Bavarian yeast). Originally brewed at the Denison's brewpub in downtown Toronto, it was then made at Mill St. Brewery from 2003-2006, and is now brewed under license at Black Oak Brewing Co. Last week, I sat down with Michael Hancock, who has been brewing Denison's Weiss for the past 17 years, to find out a bit more about Toronto's original wheat beer.

**It's often been said that you can't get a bad pint of Denison's. How to you ensure quality and consistency in the Weiss?**

**M.H.** I've had what I think are bad pints of Denison's. Not too many, thank goodness. Two years ago, I had some brewers call me and say: "Michael, we're here drinking your wheat beer at such and such a place and we know you would not be happy with the way it's tasting. We suggest you come in and check it out." I was there within three hours. I think the lines were dirty – they had been left too long. I don't clean the lines as often as I'd like to, but I try to make sure they're always clean.

Here's another thing: I will not have my beer put on a line that has carried beer flavoured with a fruit essence: they really leave their mark on the line. A wheat beer will pick up the fruit flavor for up to a year, despite cleaning the lines as often as you can. What I will do in that case is replace all the flexible beer tubing I can get at.

It's very rare to get [Denison's Weiss] in bad conditions. That's simply because it is brewed in Oakville and distributed in Toronto, and it moves quickly. From a microbiological point of view we are very careful and very clean. Wheat beer is so easy to make, but it's the way you make it. And it's the quality of the ingredients you use that is so important.



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[WWW.BEEROLOGY.CA](http://WWW.BEEROLOGY.CA)**Denison's Weiss is currently only available on draught. What is your distribution region?**

**M.H.** It's Toronto. My distribution philosophy is "as close to Toronto as I can get". There is absolutely no point in me taking beer to Ottawa when I can sell it here. I'm so strapped by capacity. The scale of beer that I am making right now is such that [Denison's] can be regarded as no more than a hobby business, because the volume is so tiny. I can't do any more unless we come up with some way of producing more beer. There is already a demand for the wheat beer that is not satisfied. You can only get away with that for so long.

There is also no point in me bottling the beer if I can sell it all draught. There may be more of a margin, selling bottled beer, but I couldn't introduce bottles and then cut back on my draught accounts. I believe strongly in customer service and supply. If I got this into bottles, the increase in volume would be so high that I'd better have all my ducks in a row, and a really good brewing facility, before I do that.

**Have you considered opening a brewery?**

**M.H.** Right now I'm doing about 500-750 hectoliters a year, total. I can't do any more unless we come up with some way to produce more beer. I've had a business plan developed, and have been looking at different buildings around the city for about a year. I have brewing equipment being offered to me in Germany. I have bottles with Denison's labels looking at me in my office, and cans too....

**So it's a real possibility?**

**M.H.** I'd say it is.

**You have been brewing Denison's Weiss for 17 years now, since 1990, has the recipe changed at all?**

**M.H.** No, although I'm using more imported ingredients than I used to, and the beer is better off for it. This doesn't mean that imported malt are better than domestic malt, it just means that with certain styles of beer I think it's important to use imported malts. What I do right now is that, with every single malt, I will supply the majority from Germany and the rest from North America. The hops all come from Germany.

The other thing that has changed tremendously is the brewing technique. When we started producing the wheat beer it was extremely inefficient the amount of beer we got out of a certain amount of grains. The big changes that have been made have been towards getting a better yield, and that was done in the first few years at the brewpub. I'm a strong believer in not changing things. The customer notices a lot more than you'd think.



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**When you worked at Denison's brewpub you made a number of beers. How did you decide to keep the Wheat beer? Was it the top seller at the time?**

**M.H.** [At Denison's] we started with a light lager and a dark lager, both available filtered and unfiltered and I think that was a first in North America. I don't think anyone else was serving an unfiltered lager in 1989. Within weeks we decided that the filtered dark lager wasn't worth keeping because the unfiltered looked pretty good by itself. Then we introduced seasonals: we introduced a Märzen and a Bock and I did a Maibock and all kinds of other German style beers. We introduced the wheat beer in the summer of 1990.

They were all really popular. As you might expect, the pale lager was the biggest seller, but the people who drank it were probably not as passionate about it as the people who drank the dark lager. And wheat beer: I don't know of another person brewing a wheat beer in North America when I started brewing it. If there was anyone else, I'd be interested to know. So it was a real novelty when we brought it in. The wheat beer was very popular, but it was also a personal thing, too. I love wheat beer. I believe it has such huge potential.

**Wheat beer is generally considered to be a summer beer. Is this the case with the Denison's Weiss?**

**M.H.** I think some of the less enlightened bars think of it as a summer beer. What amazed a lot of my customers, in the first year or two that they had me on tap, is how little the sales dropped in the winter. They used to say to me: my god, it's December and we're still selling a lot of wheat beer! A couple of the bigger bars were so fixated in thinking that wheat beer was a summer beer, even thought it had been selling really, really well, that they would take it off tap after labour day and I'd say: 'why?' Maybe they're more interested in the trendy stuff. The demand is there year round. I guarantee it. Definitely.

