

the brew

Monkey business

The Lentern feast is thrice blessed this year, writes Cameron Williamson.

THERE must be a Franciscan monk running Monteith's brewery. This autumn the West Coast craft brewhouse has concocted a beer that has marched straight out of a monastery — a strong, malt-driven Tripel aimed at people who enjoy the abbey beers of Belgium. And a lovely, spirty, heart-warming drop it is too.

Tripel is about to hit the shelves and follows the brewery's tradition of Bock and Doppelbock winter beers. It's a sort of robust big brother to the cinnamon-smooth 6 per cent Winter Ale that has become a regular seasonal and hits the taps mid-May.

Two of a kind? Well, there is a similarity, but Tripel would be much more appropriate later in the evening, with a plate of blue cheese and a pear, after a bracing walk to digest the big beef casserole you probably consumed with a fresh-poured pint of Winter Ale. It's a port to a pinot.

Monteith's is careful to call its Tripel an "interpretation" of the abbey style, not only for reasons of veracity, copyright and the fear of God's retribution, but because it is brewed with "a characteristic Monteith's twist".

No, they haven't laced it with rata honey or Granity coaldust, although it is the colour of a West Coast river stained with beech-forest tannins. But it is a lager, not an ale, brewed with a bottom-fermenting yeast much like the rest of the Monteith's craft range.

That's immaterial to all but the technophiles, and the big orange-mahogany body of Munich and Vienna malts gives Tripel a

beefy base to carry the big 8 per cent alcohol profile and lay down a solid base for some interesting hopping. New Zealand Saaz, Green Bullet and Pacific Hallertau have been used for bittering and some aroma, but a late addition of American Cascade brings a fruity fresh aroma wafting up with the heady spirits.

Brewer Barrie Calder describes the flavours of mango and fruitcake; I particularly enjoyed the oily texture and the sweet caramel throat-coating finish.

And the history is fun: Calder is drawing on a 700-year-old tradition of bottle-conditioned ales that were "liquid bread" to the monks as they fasted their way through Lent. With the benefit of hindsight and modern strength-testing equipment, it's not difficult to imagine how living on a diet of prayer and strong ale like this might have brought the monks closer to Him on high. How they maintained their traditionally rotund figures is anyone's guess.

And the "tripel" moniker hails from the days when limited literacy made it easier to inform the populace about the strength of a beer with a logical code of crosses. It still persists with traditional brewers such as England's Wadsworth, whose 6X is a famous brew, although the Australian beer called XXXX was apparently just a simple spelling error.

Monteith's is calling Tripel a "super speciality" limited release and will sell it as a four pack at \$12.99.

■ cam@realbeer.co.nz

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Chablis chic



WARREN BARTON

ANYONE who read the column a couple of weeks ago about identifying and understanding French wines and has since done a bit of homework will now know that chardonnay is responsible for Chablis and many of the other wonderful white burgundies — Meursault, Puligny-Montrachet, Corton, Charlemagne and Pouilly-Fuisse among them.

They will probably also have learned to their surprise that Chablis doesn't actually taste like many of these other wines made from chardonnay because it is a true expression of a terroir that is quite different from the others and because much of it never gets within sniffing distance of an oak barrel.

The chances are that in their search for this information they also came across the name Laroche, as in Michel Laroche, a latter-day mover and shaker in a family that has a winemaking tradition that dates back five generations — to 1850 — in the heart of Chablis where monks first made the world's most popular wine 11 centuries ago.

But it's a tradition that has undergone a few changes since Michel became involved in the 1960s and set the family company on a course that has left one foot still firmly rooted in the Old World, the other in the New World.

Laroche no longer confines its attention to Chablis, or to the technology and thinking that has for so long driven the industry in this part of France. Fortunately it has done so in Chablis without sacrificing any of the poise, the minerality and the subtle honeyed beauty of the best of these wines, which in some cases don't get going for the first five years and will last for 15, even longer.

The other part of the equation is a completely different story. Michel is one of a growing number of winemakers in France who wants not to destroy the appellation system — which determines what shall be grown where and how much — but to move beyond it and allow the planting of different varietals in areas



Michel Laroche's family has a winemaking tradition that dates from when monks first made the world's most popular wine 11 centuries ago.

most suited to their growth, then "cherry pick" from selected areas to produce the best possible wine — as we do here.

Hence his interest in the Languedoc, the world's biggest regional vineyard in the south of France, where such things have become possible and, in the process, 100,000 hectares of vines have been uprooted and replanted with varieties that the customer actually wants.

Since Laroche became one of the first "outsiders" to invest here 10 years ago, the speed of change has, by French standards, been quite remarkable. Now a high-powered commission is recommending that the industry makes many of the changes that have been achieved in the Languedoc, including the labelling of wine to show the variety or varieties from which it is made.

You have only to look at the range of Laroche wines now available here to get a handle on the spirit of that change and to understand the difference between Chablis and a chardonnay from elsewhere.

None of the Chablis come cheap. The 2003 Saint Martin and the 2004 Laroche cost \$41.95 and \$36.95 respectively but there is no mistaking the quality of the unoaked wines, one of them subtly flavoured with citrus and tropical fruits, the other with apples and both of them with the classic mineral streak that is the trademark of soils said to owe their special character to a foundation of fossilised crushed oyster shells.

The best of the Chablis, the 2002 Premier Cru Les Fourchaumes Vieilles Vignes (\$68.95) and the 2002 Les Clos Grand Cru (\$158) do have a subtle hint of oak which adds to the texture and complexity without masking the underlying steely character or affecting the elegance.

The Laroche 2004 Chardonnay from the South of France is one the average punter will better understand. Fresh, fruit-driven with a touch of toast and a hint of oak. Easy Drinking. It sells for \$19.95, as do a 2003 merlot and syrah.

■ winerite@xnet.co.nz

good buying

A VISITOR

Croft Fine Tawny Port, \$36.95

Ports, particularly those made in the lighter, more mellow tawny style, are among the most versatile of all — especially good with cheeses and dessert and an excellent tippie in the summer when it should be served slightly chilled in a generous glass.



LUSCIOUS

Alpha Domus The Piklot 2005 Leonarda Late Harvest Semillon, \$16.95

There are not many dessert wines of this quality and appeal on the market at this price. A mouthful of grapefruit marmalade fleshed out with a lick of honey. Finished clean with refreshing citrus flavour, not a mouthful of sticky, syrupy fruit as is so often the case.

NEWCOMER

Margrain 2004 River's Edge Pinot Noir, \$24.95

A well-priced second-tier pinot noir from a winemaker with a wonderful and apt turn of phrase: "... An exciting roughness of edge that will remind you of the boy your mother never wanted you to date." An early drinker that many will find appealing.



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