

Foulmouthed Brewing in South Portland tops out the range of alcohol by volume for Maine blueberry beers. Blue Balls, a Belgian strong dark ale barrel-aged on local wild blueberries comes in at 12% ABV. As the brewer cautions, this is a powerful beer, not a light fruity ale. Rich and dark, it is probably best appreciated slightly less chilled than most American beer.

It might also seem like brewer Craig Dilger is trying to live up to his brewery's moniker by calling the beer Blue Balls, but the tiny spherical fruit that covers thousands of acres in Maine really is rich in anthocyanin, contributing such a rich blue color.

Lake St. George Brewing in Liberty offers a light, tart blueberry sour ale called Kerplunk! Find out more about it in the Road Trippin' column in this issue.

Once limited to pies and muffins, Maine low-bush blueberries show up in every variety of beer brewed. Moreover, blueberries are used in every style of beverage imaginable. Wine and spirits, cider and seltzer, kombucha, soda, cocktail mixers, bitters, and even flavored milk are all enhanced by Maine's iconic, indigenous berry.

Whatever your beverage of choice is, try the blueberry version for the antioxidants, for the sake of local farmers, and most of all, for the flavor. ●



Maine Wild Blueberry Beers

By Scott K. Fish

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Using a very unscientific method for finding out how Maine craft brewers create fruited-beer from Maine's State Fruit — the wild blueberry — I asked Facebook friends for their favorite Maine blueberry beer.

Geary Brewing Company's "Pick ME" blueberry lager and Allagash Brewing Company's "Little Sal" blueberry ale, both Portland based, were recommended most often.

I interviewed Allagash's Brewmaster Jason Perkins and also Geary's president and CEO, Robin C. Lapoint, about their respective blueberry beers.

For good measure, Wyman's Brand Manager Colleen Craig was kind enough to answer questions from that company's longstanding perspective.

Blueberries grow in 38 states, but wild blueberries grow only in Maine and Canada. According to Wyman's — a Maine grower/processor synonymous with 140 years with wild blueberries — for the last 10 millenniums "wild blueberries have flourished in the most challenging conditions Maine and Canada have to offer. It only made them nutritious and more delicious."

Wyman's sees a clear advantage in making beer with wild blueberries over cultivated blueberries. "There is a much more intense flavor and color from wild blueberries," Craig explained. "Some people use cultivated (berries) and add blueberry flavor. That really doesn't cut it for most local Maine breweries."

For Geary's "Pick ME" and Allagash's "Little Sal," creating blueberry beer is basically a two-step process. Step one: Brew the base beer. Step two: Add Maine blueberries to the base beer.

"We've been using a variety of local fruits in our beer for probably 15 years," said Perkins. "Allagash uses whole fruit and, literally, adds it to finished beers that have gone through fermentation. Fruit transforms a beer that tastes like a red or golden ale into this kind of super interesting, fruit-forward beer," adding Allagash lets the fruit ferment on the beer.

"We'll ferment away all the sugar in the fruit we add, leaving the color, the aroma and the flavor." However, "Blueberries interact a little differently with finished beer," Perkins noted. "A lot of the flavor people associate with blueberries will ferment out in the secondary fermentation process. So, we stayed away from it initially."

Then the nearby owner of Tavern Hill Farm, a Windham organic blueberry farm, asked Allagash to give his blueberries a try. "He talked me into it," said Perkins. "We decided to ferment a very small amount that first year, and we were super happy with how it turned out."

Geary Brewing Company is New England's first craft brewery. Lapoint said when she and her husband Allen purchased the company five years ago, they wanted to expand the product line to include Pick ME blueberry lager.

"We and our brewers developed an OG lager — a typical German lager. Delicious, fresh, crisp, easy drinking. All blueberry beers at that time were made in ales," Lapoint explained. "We made ours with a base of lager, keeping it very fresh and refreshing; thirst quenching," she explained. "We started developing that product with Maine malt and Maine blueberries from Wyman's and other Maine blueberry farmers."

Lapoint said Pick ME has done very well. "People like it very much. There isn't really a beer like it. It's very easy to drink and really enjoyable," she added.

It was a short trial-and-error period before both breweries discovered their final blueberry beer recipes. Conversely, "Little Sal" and "Pick ME" take a long time to produce.

Lapoint said Pick ME blueberry lager "takes about three weeks to brew. It's in package by four weeks, either in draft or in 16-ounce cans. It doesn't take time to brew lager, but the lagering period is very long. It's a very big time investment in terms of our equipment and the lagering process."

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With Little Sal, “The base beer is made about a year before blueberries are added. These are very different processes from a lot of the beers we make,” noted Perkins. By contrast, Allagash White, the company’s flagship beer, is made in two weeks.

“Our speciality fruited beers are much more like wine,” he continued. “The beer will be brewed and aged in an oak tank, like a wine tank, for almost a year. The blueberries are added at harvest, typically in August. Then it ages on those blueberries for about three months while the re-fermentation process happens. You get the flavor, the color of the blueberries, and the yeast will ferment the sugar away. Then we’ll bottle it.”

Perkins says the process takes “roughly two years, start to finish” with about eight months to go from when blueberries are added.

Allagash’s Little Sal and Geary’s Pick ME have different presentations.

“Pick ME is in a 16-ounce four pack. It is on draft in 16 and half-barrel sizes, and it is also included as a 12-ounce in our ‘Welcome Pack’ seasonal variety pack,” Lapoint said.

Little Sal is sold in small, cork-finished champagne style bottles and on draft. “The draft,” said Perkins, “is just really special. Mostly in our tasting room, but occasionally in a few other spots.”

Lapoint talks about the Pick ME triple entendre name, explaining the thought process. “We pick blueberries, right? We’re talking about Maine (ME),” she said. “Of course, when shoppers are eyeing shelves of beer brands in bottles and cans, the Pick ME name is a nice suggestion, and it has been very popular with my individual, personalized wedding beers,” said Lapoint.

Geary’s and Allagash both speak highly of the eye-catching quality of their respective blueberry beers.

“Little Sal is a pretty spectacular looking beer,” said Perkins. “You always have certain expectations about what a beer’s going to look like. Stout is darker, but most beer is amber or golden in color. Little Sal is deep, deep purple. It’s always fun to see someone drinking it in a glass in the tasting room. You can see everybody else thinking, ‘Whoa! What’s that over there?’”

In describing Geary’s Pick ME, Lapoint said, “One thing so unique about it is the beautiful blueberry color, completely driven by the blueberry itself. There are no preservatives, additives, colors or dyes, added to any of our beers.”

Bottom line:

How do blueberry beers Pick ME and Little Sal taste? “You have to find the right idea with the right product, and get it in the right proportion, the right mix,” explained Lapoint. “Pick ME is a lager. It tastes like a lager. We created it to be complemented and paired well with Maine blueberries, but in no way are the blueberries supposed to overtake what Pick ME truly is — a beer.”

“Little Sal is going to be an unexpected flavor for some people because there is some acidity and tartness to it,” Perkins said, “but that’s natural and part of the process. Once people get over that initial surprise, I think they will really like it.”

The flavor consistency of store-bought blueberries can change from pint to pint. Is consistency of taste or flavor a consideration for blueberry beer makers?

“There are a lot of things we do in the process to keep things consistent,” said Perkins. “In a beer like Little Sal, there’s going to be some natural inconsistencies. A better comparison is with a vintage of wine. If you’re a wine lover, and you love a certain wine variety from a certain winery, every year it’s different, because the fruit crops change year-to-year.”

“It’s a little bit like that with Little Sal. It’s very naturally produced. We get different blueberries every year,” he added. “We use natural re-fermentation. The blueberries are covered in natural wild yeasts, and those are going to act a little different each time.”

“Each year, I think people who know Little Sal will find many, many more similarities than differences,” he said, “but the consistency is a little bit different. It’s not like Allagash White, our flagship, where we strive and expect that beer to be the same every time someone drinks it.”

“We always use a Wyman’s Puree product; it is 100 percent blueberry puree,” Lapoint said. “If there are variables, they are not noticeable or impactful. We’ve not had any issues. What Wyman’s sends us and what we use is always a very consistent product.”

Both Little Sal blueberry ale and Pick ME blueberry lager are available for enjoying now. For more information about Maine blueberry beers, visit: Geary Brewing Company at <https://www.gearybrewing.com/visit>; and Allagash Brewing Company <https://www.allagash.com/> Other breweries may be found through an online search. ●



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