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## Ambassador of Ale

Monday, March 28, 2011

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Connoisseur to share wisdom of Belgian brew

SUTTONS BAY – Who could resist a visit from the Beer Santa, even if he arrives during northern Michigan’s daffodil season? Especially when his bag of goodies includes six distinct styles of Belgian beer and years of beer lore waiting to be tapped.

Certainly not Martha Ryan who, with the help of her staff, plans to host the jolly man’s Belgian beer appreciation class beginning at 7 p.m., April 11, at Martha’s Leelanau Table.

Instead of cookies, Ryan will leave out plates of light, Belgian-inspired, gourmet appetizers such as waffles, endive and moules (mussels) to pair with Belgian-style blond, red and dark ales.

Comedian and Belgian beer connoisseur Stu Stuart is the evening’s self-proclaimed ‘Beer Santa,’ bringing the accumulated experience of two decades of study, at home and abroad, to those interested in the pursuit of good-tasting brew.

Stuart’s beer career began as a second-grader collecting beer cans, and his interest grew along with his collection until he reached beer-drinking age. He lived in Seattle during the birth of the ’80s craft brewing movement and also became a homebrewer. Today, Stuart shares his beer wisdom in classrooms and during several beer tours he hosts each year to places like Belgium, France or Germany.

“My main mission is to share great beers with people,” Stuart explained. “Whenever I go to parties or have a social event, I like to provide new and interesting beers for people to try.

“This is not just a tasting,” he said of the April affair. “It’s a beer class that lasts two to three hours. We’re going to sample six different Belgian-style beers and cover a little bit about Belgium – the country’s size, population, culture, cuisine and history.

“You’ll walk out with a good knowledge of what makes a Belgian and the ability to explore further on your own with some take-home materials,” he added.

Students are advised to eat before class and come prepared to be intrigued by what they learn and taste. All of the beers sampled in class will be purchased locally, so that students who develop a fondness for a particular brew can enjoy it again.

Shared appeal

Stuart said that Belgian beer not only appeals to devotees who want to try something different, but also to wine enthusiasts who simply cannot appreciate the current style of highly-hopped microbrews. Fewer hops are used in Belgian styles, yeast strains make the beer taste spicier and fruitier, and the characteristic is more malty.

“Wine drinkers who aren’t beer drinkers tend to gravitate toward very complex beers with different yeasts, such as (Belgian-style) lambics, including Gueuze,” he noted.

Of Belgian beers, in general, Stuart noted: “One of the reasons people like it so much are the flavors; it’s higher in alcohol, so people feel happier quickly and very euphoric.”

Women seem to really enjoy the taste of Belgian ales and men like the variety, Stuart said, adding that there are more than 500 beer varieties and 100 breweries found in the country, which is one-fifth the size of Michigan.

“Why do these great beers come from this seemingly random country which produces arguably the best beer, and the best variety?” he asked, rhetorically.

Those lucky enough to attend his class (limited to 30 participants) may discover the answer.

Cost of the class is \$55 and includes six tastings, light appetizers and course materials.

For information, visit [www.BelgianBeerMe.com](http://www.BelgianBeerMe.com). Call 231-271-2344 for reservations.

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