



# THE BEVERAGE PEOPLE

Beer  
Soda  
Cider

Wine  
Vinegar  
Mead

2005 Spring Catalog and Beverage People News

## BACK TO THE EPICENTER

by *Byron Burch*

Last August, I almost missed out on one of the truly memorable moments in my 34 years of home brewing. I'd been involuntarily away from The Beverage People for awhile, recovering from a pair of knee surgeries (All things considered, I'd rather have been at work).

Finally, on my very first day back, a long-time home brewer named David Sherfey walked in, accompanied by his son, and set down a small bottle of beer to be tasted.

I've known David for many years, seeing him occasionally at various conferences. When I first met him, he was from Southern California, but he has lived for a long time now in New York state, so the visit was a bit unexpected.

When I saw the bottle, I knew our tasting would be interesting for historical reasons, if nothing else. The beer was 14 years old. It was a bottle of "Epicenter" Imperial Stout, the beer Nancy Vineyard and I brewed as the commemorative beer for the *American Homebrewers Association's* 1990 National Conference, which was held in Oakland that year.

We opened the bottle, dividing the contents so that we all got a good sample to taste. Just looking at the label brought back memories. That's to be expected. What was unexpected was for this to be one of the very best beers I have ever tasted.

It seemed like I wasn't alone. There was a stunned silence in the room. I once tasted an Imperial Stout, many years ago, that was 2 1/2 years old at the time, and it was very good, but I was surprised that this one could be better so many years after it was brewed than it had been after just a few months.

That it should be true of this beer, in particular, made it even more surprising. Tasting its magnificence, and looking at the bottle, brought back all the difficulties this batch of homebrew

had to overcome.

Actually, it was three batches. We were asked to provide 500 bottles (187 ml.) for the conference, so we had to cook up three ten-gallon batches, which were eventually blended and bottled.

When we were invited, in January, to do the beer, there was just about enough time to get the beer processed and properly matured in time to be ready for the conference in June. That led to the first problem. Our fermentation area for ales and stouts, in an attached garage, was only big enough to accommodate 10 gallons at a time. The other 20 gallons had to go to an outbuilding.

That would normally be okay, but the fermentors were no sooner placed out there than an extended cold snap set in, and in Northern California, that can mean the wort will be too cold for the yeast to process. The action stopped, and the wort remained dormant for several days. Eventually, we decided they should be topped up until the inside batch was finished fermenting so we could trade places.

That, of course, is the surest way to create a warm spell, and soon fermentation locks were flying off in all directions.

Somehow, though, it all worked, and we got it bottled, with the help of friends and children. The 500 "Old Foghorn" style barley wine bottles were donated by *Anchor Brewing Company*.

All this took place, of course, just after the Loma Prieta earthquake, so we wanted to call it "Earthquake Imperial," but Charlie Papazian was reluctant to make conference attendees uneasy because we were meeting in downtown Oakland, not far from the freeway collapse. We compromised with "Epicenter Imperial Stout," putting the labels on askew to suggest a good California shake.



This article was written for The Beverage People by Byron in 2005 for a beer he brewed in 1990. He passed away in 2015, but his memory and the memory of brewing and serving this very famous beer lives on and on.

Feel free to revise and brew your own, but you may not want to make 30 gallons!

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See *Epicenter* page 2.

Anyway, here was the beer, and it was wonderful! I feel that two things (other than basic sanitation) contributed particularly to the stability of this beer, not only keeping it sound up till the conference, but for well over a decade thereafter.

The first was the use of "Smartcaps." These oxygen barrier caps keep oxygen out, also absorbing the oxygen already present in the bottle's airspace. If you have a beer you want to remain sound in storage for awhile, these caps can be an excellent idea.

The most however, was the kind of with. An Imperial Stout strongly flavored brew longer than more ordinary four or five percent

What we Imperial Stout" is a kind England many years primarily to the Baltic may be best described wines. Beer authority, uses terms like "rich" "burnt currant character tar-like."



important factor, beer we were dealing is a high alcohol, that will keep far beers having only alcohol.

now call "Russian of beer brewed in ago for export, region. These beers as black barley Michael Jackson, and "chocolate," and verging on being

Like India Pale Ales, these beers were designed to condition on the high seas, their strength and high hopping rates helping to preserve them until the destination was reached. The name came about after a British shipper was awarded a contract to keep the Imperial Russian Court adequately supplied.

Here in California the best known Imperial Stouts are a British import from Samuel Smith's Yorkshire brewery, and "Old Rasputin," a California interpretation from *North Coast Brewing* in Fort Bragg.

As with other high gravity beers, home brewers will most easily make Imperial Stouts by using malt extracts for a good portion of their fermentables, though an all-grain version is possible by drawing off the relatively concentrated wort after mashing, and severely limiting the sparge, stopping as soon as the desired gravity has been reached. In that case, of course, proper planning would allow you to continue sparging and make a "small beer" with the remaining wort.

The deep black color and roastiness can be achieved with one or more of the commonly used black grains (chocolate malt, black patent malt, or black roasted barley) used singly or in combination, and by the use of dark malt extracts. One or more of the various crystal (caramel) malts is frequently employed to add roundness and depth to the flavor. In addition, such exotics as licorice, honey, or molasses may be employed for particular effects, and sugars, or other neutral adjuncts, will suffice when your intention is just to raise the gravity. If sweetness is desired, lactose may be added to good effect.

Regardless of your approach in terms of these specialty ingredients, and whatever hop varieties you select, one thing is essential. Dark beers are best when brewed with water containing a significant amount of carbonate hardness. Carbonate alkalinity helps neutralize the extra acidity extracted from the roasted (burnt) grains, so the flavor of the beer will be smoothed out and the effect softened. With Imperial Stouts this can be particularly important, and water with 150-200 parts per million carbonate hardness is recommended. *Note also that sulfates such as gypsum have the opposite of the desired effect.*

Most ale and stout yeast strains may be used for these brews, but if you have any doubt as to whether a particular strain's maximum alcohol tolerance might be exceeded, it is best to switch to a clean-flavored wine yeast strain like Pasteur Champagne.

We're grateful to David Sherfey for his generosity in taking us so enjoyably back to the Epicenter. It was also good to be reminded that a few problems popping up during the making of a brew don't mean that all is lost.

If you'd like to try this beer, here's as close a recipe as our notes contain. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did! Don't set too many bottles aside for all those years, though. Make the children and grandchildren brew their own

## **Epicenter Imperial Stout**

*(Recipe for 10 gallons) (Repeat three times!!)*

***Dissolve the extracts in water.***

***Start raising to a boil.***

12 lbs. Dark Malt Extract  
5 lbs. Dark Dry Malt Extract  
10 gallons water

***Mash the following grains @150°F. for 60 minutes, then sparge into boiling pot.***

2 lbs. Crystal malt (C 40)  
1 lb. 2 Row malt  
1 lb. Chocolate malt  
8 oz. Munich 10 malt  
8 oz. Crystal malt (C 20)

***Add these to the boil.***

***Water Treatment (based on de-mineralized water)***

1 tsp. Gypsum  
1 tsp. Calcium Chloride  
3 tsp. Calcium Carbonate

***At bottling, add this priming sugar solution.***

10 oz. of Lactose  
6 oz. Priming Sugar

***Hops: Note the parenthesis below: (Length of time of boiling) (Bittering IBU)***

6 oz. Northern Brewer Pellets (60 min.) (92.30)  
1 1/2 oz. Perle Pellets (30 min.) (7.24)  
3 1/2 oz. Nugget Pellets (30 min.) (29.21)  
4 oz. Cascade Pellets (dry hop) (7.45)  
3/4 oz. Saaz Pellets (dry hop) (.78)

***Add these ingredients the last 5 minutes of the wort boil:***

8 oz. Chocolate malt  
12 lbs. Dry Rice Extract

***Pitch yeast at 72°F or below. Ferment at ambient temperatures from 55-70°F.***

2 packs Pasteur Champagne Wine Yeast

**SG 1.129 FG 1.020-24 IBU 136.98 ABV 13%**

