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BEER CHEERS

NEW YEAR, NEW BEER

By Stephen Beaumont

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Shopping for new suds is a refreshing endeavour.

When I was a young boy, my father, like almost all of my friend's fathers, drank beer. Unlike those other dads though, my Dad was an experimenter, the guy who would hightail it to the store every time a new brand was released and test it out with not a six-pack, but an entire case. Even when no new brews were appearing on the market, there were usually at least two or three different brands in my father's fridge.

Since this was in the day of unflinching brand loyalty, when "me and the boys" were with "our 50 and Ex", my father was a notable exception to the rule. Even though he was far from an every day beer drinker—and let's be honest, all the lagers and most of the ales of that era tasted more or less similar, if not the same—Dad relished variety in his beer selection, and would certainly be wed to no one brand.

It wasn't long before I too, became a beer experimenter. Through my university years, my friends and I tried virtually every brand on the market, save for what we considered those bland and annoying "light" beers. By the time I decided in a fit of unbridled optimism to dedicate my working life to writing about beer, I was a charter member of the "try anything once" camp.

And today, my friends, is your invitation to do the same.

As human beings, we are undeniably creatures of habit, and for a very anthropologically sound reason: that with which we are familiar is unlikely to kill us. But regardless of how good or bad it may be, beer isn't going to kill you, so there's really very little risk in trying something new. At worst, you'll lose the few bucks it cost you to buy a bottle of unfamiliar brew. At best, you'll discover not only a new favourite beer, but also an entire repertoire of flavours you didn't know existed within the world of beer.

So why not make it a holiday or New Year's resolution to sample at least one beer outside of your normal comfort zone every week or two? If you've always thought of dark beer as heavy and filling, try a dark lager like Kostritzer from Germany or a flavourful stout like St. Ambrose Oatmeal Stout, and learn about how colour in beer comes exclusively from the amount of roasting the barley receives and is entirely unrelated to calorie or alcohol content.

If you've always thought that fruit beers were somehow not "real beers," pick up a Liefmans Kriek from Belgium or a Cannery Brewing Blackberry Porter from B.C. and discover how deliciously fruit and beer can co-exist. And if you're a lager drinker with a fondness for light-bodied pilsners, pick up a bottle or two of a good German wheat beer, such as the Hacker-Pschorr Weisse or Schneider Weisse and see if you enjoy a little fruitiness and spice with your refreshment.

If you really wish to push your boundaries, pick up something radically different, like a smoked malt beer such as the legendary Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier from Bamberg in Germany, with its robustly smoky aroma and flavour. Or an intentionally soured ale like Rodenbach Grand Cru from Belgium, which could almost be equated to a very dry rosé champagne.

Regardless of what you choose though, one definite new step I recommend taking is to serve your beer at a slightly warmer temperature than you normally would. Not only will the taste and aroma of the brew fare much better in the absence of icy cold—potentially making even a familiar beer taste, well, new—you may even find the more moderate temperature will take a bit of the chill off a Canadian winter.

