

Herbs, berries spice up new spring brews

MOST of us who are into good beer are aware of **Fat Tire**★★ — the amber ale, if not the brewery, New Belgium, of Fort Collins, CO. When homebrewer Jeff Lebesch and his wife, Kim Jordan, founded the craft brewery in 1991 after a mind-expanding bicycle trek through Belgium, they made a number of smart moves.

One was to hire Peter Bouckaert, born, raised and trained in Belgium, as their brewer. While New Belgium has been churning out category leaders and best-sellers like Fat Tire, **Blue Paddle Pilsner**★★½ and **Sunshine Wheat**★★★, Bouckaert has also had free rein to be, well, Belgian.

His philosophy, he explained at beer chef Bruce Paton's memorable Belgian Beer Dinner last year, is this: What matters most, he said, is whether he likes the taste. "That's what's important. We're in the business of creating 10 minutes of pleasure. So just enjoy it," he says.

By free rein, I'm not kidding — he's done beer fermented with wild yeast, with different yeasts, with odd ingredients, fermented in wooden barrels, re-fermented. You name it. Consider New Belgium's spring seasonal, **Springboard**. It's almost all of the above: Strange spices, addition of beer aged in barrels, whew.

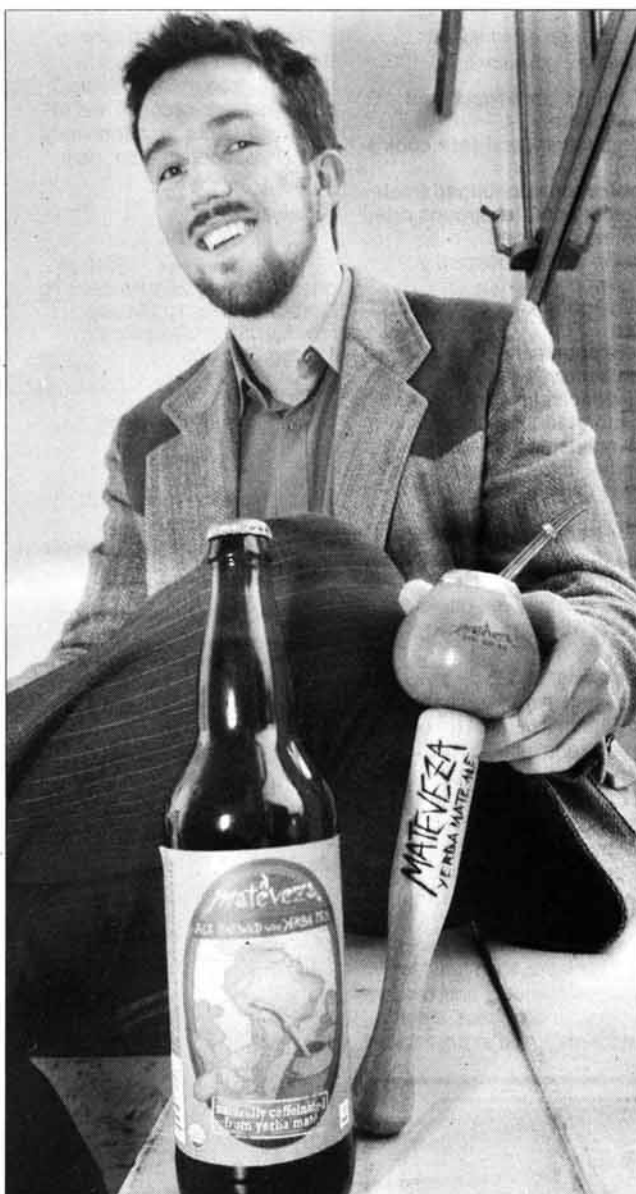
Springboard★★½ is amazing and it's our Beer of the Week.

I'm with Peter on this one. I liked it. It was 10 minutes of pleasure. A cloudy, lemon color, the beer has a spicy, fruity nose rising from a large, lasting head of rocky foam. It has a full mouth feel and an unusual drying, spicy, herbal finish.

One caution. This is a beer to drink fairly cold. When it warms, the spices tend to take over and create a dry, almost herbal drink.

I believe this is the first time I've ever had to look up ingredients. Besides two row pale barley malt, there's a percentage of oats which, the brewer says, adds to the full, malty taste. The fresh beer is blended with a bit of beer fermented in barrels.

The herbs are Schisandra and Goji berries. According to Wikipedia, Goji berries are renowned in Asia as a nutrient-rich natural food and have been used in traditional Chinese medicine for eons. Schisandra is a Chinese plant with bright



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AYE, MATE: Jim Woods, a homebrewer from Lafayette, is founder and president of Mateveza Yerba Mate Ale. He combined yerba mate, a South American herb, with pale ale.

red berries that have a sour, sweet, salty and bitter taste.

Springboard also has wormwood, the spice used in absinthe, a potent, distilled drink made famous by artists in Paris early in the 20th century.

It's quite a package. I can't wait to see what New Belgium does next.

Moving on

There's another, very different, very herbal beer just reaching Bay Area stores. It's **Mateveza Yerba Mate Organic Ale**★★. Homebrewer Jim Woods, who grew up in Lafayette, is the guy behind Mateveza. He doesn't have the exotic background that New

Belgium's master brewer does, but he gets four stars for originality.

Yerba Mate is an herb used to make a caffeine-laden tea that is very popular in South America, Woods says. It's drunk with a straw from a hollow gourd, called a "mate." Besides caffeine the drink also contains theobromine, the active alkaloid in chocolate. It's a mild, long-lasting stimulant.

Woods is a homebrewer and got curious about what would happen if yerba mate was added to a pale ale then hopped perhaps with floral Cascade hops. Hmmm. He liked the result and took the formula to Butte Brewing, the organic brewer in Chico. Now



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WHAT'S ON TAP

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we have Mateveza, no straw needed.

It's an unfiltered, dusty gold with a sharp herbal nose. The taste's a shocker: tangy and very dry with just a hint of malt sweetness fading into a long, dry finish with a strong, herbal "green tea" tea note. I found it very crisp and interesting. I'm going to try a few of these over the next few months. It comes in large 22-ounce bottles for about \$3.99.

Coming up

► On Saturday, April 7, 11 a.m. Fourth Annual Firkin Festival. Triple Rock, 1920 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. Several dozen real ales from brewers around California, \$25. Benefit. Call (510) 843-2739. If you love real ale, beer made without additives or pasteurization in the English fashion, or are just curious, this is an event not to miss.

Several beer dinners are also coming up.

► On Tuesday, April 25, Pleasanton Hotel executive chef Neil Marquis hosts a dinner featuring Anchor Brewing at the hotel. Call (925) 846-8106.

► On Friday, April 27, beer chef Bruce Paton, executive chef at the Cathedral Hill Hotel in San Francisco, hosts a dinner featuring the beers of Valley Brew, Stockton. On May 25, his dinner will feature the Belgian-style beers of Allagash Brewing, Portland, Maine. For info, go to www.beer-chef.com or call (415) 674-3406.

Surf's up: I wrote this column on a trip to Maui, where I discovered a primo brewpub — Maui Brewing. To find out more, check out my blogs: www.beernewsletter.com/blog and www.ibabuzz.com/beer.

Salud, er, aloha.

Beer ratings are based on a star system. ★★★★★ — world classic; ★★★★★ — outstanding; ★★★ — excellent; ★★ — good; ★ — average.

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