

# Masters of Malt (and Barley, and Hops)

BY DAVID ORT

Like their wine-pouring and cocktail-slinging compatriots, Toronto's brewmasters, restaurateurs, and chefs have built our city into one of Canada's fastest growing destinations for craft beer. No longer beholden to big-name corporate breweries, imbibers are now spoiled for choice when it comes to artisan suds. But what exactly is craft beer? Must it be brewed on a small scale? Must it be locally produced? Does it demand the use (or absence) of particular ingredients? The answers to these questions are varied, and are best discovered by ordering up a pint or two.

**Bar Hop**, conveniently located between the fashionable King West neighbourhood and the bustling Theatre District, is a logical starting point for any survey of Toronto's craft beer highlights. Its more than 30 taps skew to Ontario-produced options; the bottle menu casts a wider net with an exceptional selection of imports, including many classics from Belgium.

International and out-of-province gems are similarly highlighted on the 80-bottle menu at **Bar Volo**, which over the course of 25 years has evolved from a red-sauce Sicilian restaurant to become one of Toronto's top sources for craft beer. After a full renovation last December they now also pour from over 30 taps that feature, among other things, a half-dozen of the bar's own cask ales. Patrons here also have an excellent opportunity to expand their ale awareness: Tomas Morana (who owns the bar with his brother Julian and father, Ralph) notes that Volo's bar-only service model means that bartenders can help customers sort through the plentiful offerings.

In some cases, the Toronto brands that feature prominently on many of the city's best beer menus also serve their drinks directly: two of our longest-established businesses, Mill Street and Amsterdam breweries, built or expanded brew pub-style restaurants in 2013.

To inaugurate the Distillery Historic District's sleek, spacious **Mill Street Beer Hall**, head brewmaster Joel Manning and his team created three new recipes—an English-style bitter, a complex abbey-style dubbel, and a tart Berliner weisse—but he may be most excited about the restaurant's bierschnaps, a beer-distilled spirit that carries flavours from the base beer, like the raspberries in Mill Street's frambozen, through to the finished product.

Like his counterparts at Amsterdam—which opened its own **Amsterdam Brew House** on the waterfront—Manning also manages Mill Street's sizeable production facility in suburban Toronto, which feeds the demand for the brand's numerous mainstream offerings.

As a city of amalgamated boroughs, Toronto was for a time governed by a somewhat patchwork collection of bylaws, including a few notable anachronisms. For instance, the sale of alcohol was prohibited in the Junction, a neighbourhood northwest of downtown, through to the late 1990s.

Jason Fisher opened his **Indie Alehouse** 15 years after that law's repeal. Amongst antique shops, coffehouses and restaurants—including **3030 Dundas West**, a craft beer destination itself—Fisher and his head brewmaster, Jeff Broeders, produce and sell a broad selection of beers ranging in profile from hoppy

to sour. To get a true sense of their diverse brews, Fisher encourages visitors to “check out more than one. We want you to experiment and try a lot of things.” To that effect, Indie Alehouse offers flights of five five-ounce samples at its own brew pub.

Also in the west end and operating on a similar, smallish scale, **Bellwoods Brewery** has earned a following and awards for its tight list of seasonal beers. Its picket-fenced patio on hip Ossington Avenue is an ideal spot for enjoying carefully crafted ales alongside gourmet snacks, salads and charcuterie.

Indeed, the practice of pairing this sort of fare with beer has over the years gained considerable prominence. **Beer Bistro**, easily accessible at King and Yonge streets, is a natural go-to for food-and-brew matches with a certain amount of polish. Or try **Allen's** on the Danforth for well-poured pints and more traditional British pub grub—your meal will taste even better if its served on the tree-shaded back patio. In Little Italy, Spanish-influenced taverna **Bar Isabel** also boasts significant dinner-and-drinks appeal; the kitchen turns out delicious seafood, cured meats and more, but the beer list compiled by manager Guy Rawlings (with help from Bar Volo's Tomas Morana) deserves praise of its own.

Many of Isabel's best bottles come from Quebec's Le Trou du Diable, but generally, Rawlings says the restaurant is willing to deal with any brewery that produces interesting beer that he and his staff think is tasty.

In that, Rawlings has probably come as close as possible to defining craft beer's essence: simply, it is distinctive and flavourful beer that's made with care. Of course, a visit to one or more of Toronto's top bars, breweries and restaurants is sure to help you form your own, tasteful impression.

*David Ort writes about food and drink for a variety of publications, and is also the author of the Canadian Craft Beer Cookbook, due to be published in November 2013.*



**3030 Dundas West**  
3030 Dundas St. W., 416-769-5736  
3030dundaswest.com

**Allen's**  
143 Danforth Ave., 416-463-3086  
allens.to

**Amsterdam Brew House**  
245 Queens Quay W.,  
416-504-1020  
amsterdambrewhouse.com

**Bar Hop**  
391 King St. W., 647-352-7476  
barhopbar.com

**Bar Isabel**  
797 College St., 416-532-2222  
barisabel.com

**Bar Volo**  
587 Yonge St., 416-928-0008  
barvolo.com

**Beer Bistro**  
18 King St. E., 416-861-9872  
beerbistro.com

**Bellwoods Brewery**  
124 Ossington Ave.,  
416-535-4586  
bellwoodsbrewery.com

**Indie Alehouse**  
2876 Dundas St. W., 416-760-9691  
indiealehouse.com

**Mill Street Beer Hall**  
21 Tank House Ln., 416-681-0338  
toronto.millstreetbrewpub.ca