



Sunday Age
Sunday 30/05/2010

Page: 5
Section: General News
Region: Melbourne, AU
Circulation: 228600
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 884.57 sq.cms.



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Biero's concept "beervault": The vaults allow bottled beer to be transferred into pressure and temperature-controlled tubes that act like kegs to keep beer fresh.

PICTURE: CRAG SILLITOE

At \$160 a bottle, it's beer, but not as you know it

Top-end, high-alcohol brews are taking tipplers by storm, writes **James Smith**.

MANY proud fathers hold a ceremonial wetting of their newborn's head; few do so with beer that costs \$160 a stubby.

But when Mik Halse celebrated the arrival of son Oliver earlier this month, he saw it as an opportunity to treat his friends to two bottles from Scottish brewery BrewDog: Tactical Nuclear Penguin and Sink the Bismarck. As the former and current world-record holders for strongest beer made to date (32 per cent and 41 per cent respectively), they cost \$150 and \$160 a bottle.

"I was only going to have one kid so being into beer I wanted something really crazy to share with 10 friends," the former chef turned beer rep says. "It was about having something really special on a special day for me — although I would have bought them

anyway!"

Halse is among a growing band of beer connoisseurs prepared to open their wallets to indulge their palates. While the cost may seem prohibitive, these exotic brews are savoured in much the same way as a fine whisky or brandy, generally sipped slowly in 30-millilitre drams. Most can be kept for a few days after being opened without spoiling and some come with reusable stoppers.

They are something of a niche within a niche: the real top end of the craft beer market. The increase in quality imported beers and the growth of the micro-brewery market has drawn more drinkers into the search for different and exotic varieties. Importers are being encouraged to bring in rare or vintage beers from Europe and America and local brewers are taking a gamble on releasing high-alcohol beers

that require ageing before hitting the shelves.

Boutique bottle shops are increasingly stocking exotic beers, and some Melbourne bars have started pushing them in the way they have been selling select wines for years: often matched with food or suggested for someone's palate after a discussion between bartender and customer.

The high price is due to a number of factors, including the scarcity of limited-release products reaching Australia; the cost of production (often the beer goes through multiple fermentations and ageing processes before being bottled); or one-off collaborations between breweries.

It can also come down to a beer's vintage. Many stronger styles — Imperial versions of stouts, porters, India Pale Ales, for example — can be cellared



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for years, maturing and changing character over time.

According to John Cope-Williams, of CBD bar Cookie, "most expensive beers are deemed upon worth, not margins, so the rarer and older the beer and the greater the demand and a depleting supply, the greater the worth".

In a world-first concept that removes the gamble of buying an untried costly bottle of beer, the newly opened Biero bar in Little Lonsdale Street has installed 10 "beervaults" — clear, cylindrical dispensers created by Footscray design company JonesChijoff.

The vaults allow bottled beer to be transferred into pressure and temperature-controlled tubes that act like kegs to keep beer fresh. They're the \$150,000 brain-child of a group of Melbourne graduates who wanted a way to sample exotic beers available only in bottles. "This way we can showcase some really rare bottles or give

people the chance to buy an expensive beer to be transferred to the vaults where it can be kept fresh for up to four or five days," says co-founder Iqbal Ameer.

Customers can either buy a beer sample from a dispenser, or use a spare vault to store a full bottle of beer they want to savour over a few nights at the bar.

The diverse interest in boutique beers is evident in the clientele of Thornbury's Carwyn Cellars, where manager James Greenfield serves students who have pooled their finances to buy one bottle, as well as regulars who pick up \$90 mixed six-packs every week.

"It's easier for me to sell a \$40 bottle of beer than a \$40 bottle of wine," he says.

The pleasure of sipping a rare beer is one Mik Halse plans to share with his son when he comes of age: he has cellared a 2010 vintage magnum of Belgian beer Chimay to be cracked on Oliver's 18th birthday.





TOP PRICED BEERS

BOTTLE SHOPS	BARS
■ BrewDog Sink The Bismarck (41%) - \$160 for 330ml	■ Le Baladin Xyauyu Barley Wine (13.5%) - \$100 for 375ml
■ BrewDog Tactical Nuclear Penguin (32%) - \$150 for 330ml	■ Moo Brew Rare Oak-Aged Seasonal Stout (8.5%) - 10c per 10ml (\$57 a pint). One off auction at Beer DeLuxe during the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival
■ Crown Ambassador 2009 vintage (10%) - \$70 for 750ml (2010 vintage released August 2)	■ Emerson's 2005 Taleri George Spicy Ale (6.8%) - \$85 for 500ml
■ Mikkeller Stella 0 Festival Edition (10%) - \$115 for 1500ml	■ Emerson's 2006 Old 95 (7%) - \$75 for 500ml
■ Nogne 0 Dark Horizon #2 (16%) - \$65 for 500ml	■ Cooper's Vintage 2009 (7.5%) - \$45 for 330ml
■ Holgate Beelzebub's Jewels (12.5%) - \$53 for 750ml	