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Ask A Brewer Half Moon Bay Brewing Co.'s Kirk Hillyard

By Brian Yaeger, Tue., Aug. 3 2010 @ 3:13PM Categories: Ask A Brewer, Beer Comments (1)

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Half Moon Bay Brewing Company brewmaster Kirk Hillyard.

Half Moon Bay Brewing Company — about a half-hour down the coast, just off Highway 1 — just celebrated its 10th anniversary. Sipping pints by the fire pit at the family- and dog-friendly brewpub has come to exemplify California chill. While brewmaster Kirk Hillyard has worked at HMBBC since 2005, he has been brewing in Half Moon Bay since before the place even opened, having started homebrewing as a student at the local high school.

SFoodie: What is the primary difference between being a homebrewer and a brewmaster?

Hillyard: Volume. A homebrewer can be experimental and if it doesn't work out, you only have a few gallons to convince your friends to drink. If you brew a batch

professionally that doesn't come out right you have hundreds of gallons you have to figure out what to do with. Also, when I was homebrewing I took for granted how much time I could give a beer to finish fermenting, conditioning, or clarifying. Sometimes as a brewmaster you don't have that luxury and have to keep the beers moving.

For such a sociable place like Half Moon Bay Brewing, is it the beer or the setting that is the bigger draw, and should one necessarily take precedence? Honestly, I think the setting is the biggest draw. There aren't too many places where you can enjoy a drink and a bite to eat a stone's throw from the ocean. There are definitely people, though, that come for the beer. The easiest way to try the only brews being created on the San Mateo coast is to come by the pub and enjoy the view and a brew.

What is the process for creating a new recipe and what percentage actually go on tap?

We don't have a small system here to try new recipes, so we try to make sure the recipe is sound from the beginning whenever brewing a new beer. I start by leafing through the literature I have and looking at recipes of historic examples of the style I want to create. Other brewers I know in the area are also very willing to give advice. If another brewery makes a beer I really like I can usually call them up and they will tell me exactly how they make it. That's one of the awesome aspects of this industry. I will tweak it and try to make it my own.



Mavericks, named for the gonzo surf competition.

Do you surf, and what would it take for you to tackle Mavericks? How busy does it get at the pub during the contest?

I am actually one of the few people from the coast that doesn't surf. That may be one of the reasons I got into beer; when my friends were surfing I was usually watching from the bluffs with a cold one. The guys that surf Mavericks are really incredible. It takes a lot of guts and a lot of skill.

During the contest the pub gets pretty crazy. I think we sold about 2,500 pints the last time they held it. Our pumps on the serving tanks pushing beer to the bar run off compressed air and make a clicking sound when a bartender is pulling a beer. During the contest I was working in the cellar and I could hardly hear myself think, it seemed that every tap was pouring the entire day.

It's your last meal. What is it and what do you pair it with?

It depends! But right now it is really foggy here in the harbor (surprise) so I am going to say a big bowl of cassoulet. Cassoulet is kind of cheating because it combines some of my favorite foods: duck confit, sausage, bacon, and beans. I would pair it with maybe Maredsous 8 or Westmalle Dubbel, something big enough to stand up to the cassoulet but also refreshing enough to cut through the richness.

Half Moon Bay Brewing Company: 390 Capistrano (at Prospect), Half Moon Bay, (650) 728-2739.

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