

# Calendar

## Pirate Hooch

### Beer Tasting and Lecture

Johnny Fincioen doesn't encourage people to wax metaphorical about beer. No language like "fruity" or "smoky" or "spicy" passes his lips. "I don't believe in it," says the Belgian-beer importer who is himself a Belgian native. "Everybody's taste is different. Anyway, they'll taste what they want. So I just say, for example, 'I hope you find an underlying sourness, because it's aged two years in oak casks.' Just like with winemaking, you have lactic acid that develops in oak when you age beer in it."

For 20 years Fincioen and his wife (and business partner) Claudine Van Massenhove were in the "information technology" business. Then, in 1994, they emigrated to Santa Barbara and founded the Global Beer Network, having noted on trips to the States the growing interest in microbrewed beer.

The 49-year-old Fincioen says his beer knowledge comes from his genes and his personal history. "As children, we drank table beer, which is two percent alcohol. At school we got eight ounces poured into glasses from big bottles at lunchtime. And our mothers always cooked with beer."

Admittedly, beer doesn't have the same cachet as wine, but beer doesn't need it, says Fincioen; it has its own place in world culture. "You have to understand that wine was once reserved for the very rich, because wine can only be made once a year. Common people everywhere used grains to make alcoholic beverages every day. They still do in places like black Africa and in the rain forests south of here. Even in cities, they know how to make a seven-day beer. Ask any health worker who has been to Kinshasa; they will tell you of the potent beverage made from sorghum. In Peru the Indians make one from corn."

In antiquity, homebrews saved uncountable lives, according to this true believer in beer, "because it was the only safe thing to drink. Alcohol kills bacteria."



Johnny Fincioen

The monks at the time of the plague said, 'Don't drink water; drink our beer.' Even my aunt would never let me touch water. She said, 'You're going to die if you do.'



Belgian beers from [www.globalbeer.com](http://www.globalbeer.com) website

Drink table beer.' That was 40 years ago."

At Hillcrest Whole Foods Fincioen will give a lecture on the history and lore of Belgian beer and offer 11 beers for tasting. They range from the fizzy, variously flavored lambics, to the triple-fermented, dark-brown ales.

Of the lambics, Fincioen says, "In Belgium we have been adding flavors since prehistory. We use all kinds of spices, herbs, and fruits. The kinds of tastes you can introduce are unlimited, from peach to coriander to orange peel."

The lambics are light. An ale called Gulden Draak, by contrast, is so thick it can almost be eaten with a spoon. "Barley wine" is another name for this type of rich beer.

Among the 40 kinds of Belgian beer on the Hillcrest Whole Foods shelves, four-packs of 12-oz. bottles are priced \$4.49 to \$9.89. Magnums run \$22.99 to \$29.99. Apparently, these are a plebeian's beverage no more.

"You should serve the lower-end ones, like the lambics, as cold as American beer," says Fincioen. "You can drink two, three, four of them, without being too much affected. Our better

beers that are aged — and refermented in the bottle — are for sipping at a warmer temperature, like very good red wine." Guzzlers, no matter what their finances, won't want to choose among these. "They're the type of beer that you can take an hour to drink."

In Belgium, each beer is served in its own type of glass, Fincioen says. Some shapes are traditional. Others enhance flavors or aromas, like the snifters used for cognacs. At Hillcrest Whole Foods the beer will be served in plastic cups.

Bread and crackers will be available as palate cleaners; in reality, many more types of food go with beer than go with wines, claims our guide, because of beer's wider taste range. Beer with chocolate is not an alien combination in Belgium. Fincioen hosts entire multi-course, multi-beer dinners.

Of the 22 beers that he imports, only one is available on tap in San Diego. "We are only in one place: B.J.'s in La Mesa. They brew their own beer but have three or four guest taps, and my Piraat is always there."

Some version of this brew was drunk by sailors in the 17th and 18th Centuries, according to Fincioen's

website, [www.globalbeer.com](http://www.globalbeer.com). "The daily distribution of a pint of this ale kept the pirates in good health and gave them the spirit to survive the hard life on the sea," it says.

Oblivious to the boss' message about metaphors, the Web master goes on about Piraat, whose alcohol content is a potent 12.5 percent: "Piraat is a wickedly rich and rounded brew that packs a mighty punch. The powerful glow builds up from inside. Reminiscent of bread dough, spices, and tropical fruits."

This reporter bought a bottle of framboise lambic as part of her research. Under the cap there was a cork to be pulled. A beer with wine pretensions? It was purplish-pink and tasted like unsweetened, raspberry-flavored soda. Conclusion: more research is necessary.

— Jeanne Schinto

**Beer Tasting and Lecture**  
**Friday, November 30,**  
**6:30-8:30 p.m.**  
**Hillcrest Whole Foods Market**  
**711 University Avenue, Hillcrest**  
**\$10**  
**Reservations: 619-294-2800**

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