



By Bob "Now go have a beer" Paolino

**M**adison, Wisconsin, has embraced craft beer for at least two decades. After all, Wisconsin has some craft breweries that have been in business for more than 25 years, and Madison is home to North America's second longest running craft beer festival, the Great Taste of the Midwest, which is in its 24th year in 2010. If you can't find a good craft beer on tap in Madison, you just aren't trying very hard. Even some of the smallest neighborhood taverns in Madison, particularly on the eastside, have long had at least a couple of Wisconsin or other Midwestern craft beers on tap, whether Capital, Sprecher, Summit or others, and perhaps one or two national brands such as Sierra Nevada. Despite doing most of their sales in Miller and Bud, a few places, such as the Big10 Pub on the west side near University of Wisconsin's Camp Randall football stadium, have had several good beers on tap ranging from tiny Lake Louie Brewing Company in Arena, to large regional craft brewers such as Great Lakes Brewing Company in Cleveland. The Big10 is a great place to have a craft beer after the game (whether as spectator, or, in the case of this writer, after playing hockey after work on a Friday evening), or to watch the game on TV, but no one would mistake it for what most readers of this publication would consider a "beer bar."

A few small neighborhood pubs, such as the former Wonder's Pub on the east side, went beyond those places that happened to serve some good beers, and put more emphasis on being a craft beer bar. Wonder's, which did business for nearly two decades in the location now occupied by the Alchemy Cafe, had eight tap handles (including a handpump). Eight beers doesn't sound like much of a selection compared to some of today's multi-taps, but no lines were wasted on mass-market industrial lagers and the pub's regulars experience a wide selection over time because of the frequent rotation.

But until relatively recently, if you really wanted a big multi-tap selection, you were pretty much limited to the Essen Haus/Come Back Inn downtown, or maybe the Old Chicago on the far west side. In the last five years or so, however, Madison has seen substantial growth in the number of non-brewing establishments that are putting a focus on craft beer as the reason to visit. We'll profile seven of them here—at least one of them should appeal to you, but we recommend visiting all seven just to be sure.

### **Maduro**

What eventually became the first in this new wave of beer bars began its existence on New Year's Eve 1997 as an upscale cigar bar. Owner Brian Haltinner pursued his love of fine wine and food at the former Opera House restaurant (the original location) and he opened Maduro as a place for

whiskey and smoking. Beer was not a big focus at the original Maduro. It had six decent beers on tap, plus a handpump, but cigars, spirits, and wine in a lounge atmosphere were what Maduro was all about.

All that changed in 2005, when Madison's city smoke-free workplace ordinance took effect, forcing Haltinner to reinvent his business. They added 12 more draught lines for a total of 19, including the beer engine, and began to make the selection more adventurous. More taps led to more beer people discovering Maduro and the beer selection became progressively more interesting. Sales did go down somewhat following the smoke-free ordinance, particularly through the winter when smokers were less inclined to go outside, but Maduro did become a more exciting place for beer enthusiasts to go. By March 2006, Haltinner had successfully lobbied the city council for an exemption for cigar bars, but the added beer selection was there to stay.

Manager Vanessa Shipley notes that she regularly keeps Duchesse de Bourgogne and St. Bernardus Abt. 12 on tap—indeed, Maduro was the first place in Madison to carry a selection of Belgian draught beers on a regular basis—as well as Guinness, a few from Bell's, and one from Stone. She rounds out the rest of the selection with whatever "oddties" she can find and attempts to maintain a range of styles that can accommodate most anyone's palate. She is very open to suggestions from customers for new beers to put on tap. Shipley seeks to serve each beer in glassware appropriate for the style when possible. Some bottled beers are available but aren't a big focus, although Shipley says that she will sometimes add bottles to the menu to add unusual beers.

Maduro offers cigar events at various times throughout the year, often combined with appropriate whiskeys or beers, and beer tasting and beer education events, sometimes partnering with nearby restaurants for food events.

Those who come to Madison to attend the Great Taste of the Midwest may be familiar with Maduro's Friday night party for which Maduro puts Bell's beers on all taps. Remember the Opera House? Larry Bell became a regular customer on his visits to Madison, and Haltinner credits Larry Bell and Fred Bueltmann (who was with Bell's at the time) for getting him interested in craft beer.

### **Dexter's Pub**

Nick Zabel helped pay his way through school delivering Miller for a local distributor, yet it was that job that turned him on to craft beer. "I loved hanging out at Steve's [Liquor]," Zabel said, adding that a big part of the reason was his interest in one of the women who worked there at the time, someone who also helped him become more interested in craft beer. Before long he was delivering Miller but drinking Anchor. In the late 1990s, Nick began working at the Big10, which, though not explicitly a "craft beer bar," has become a very good place to find some good micros despite being located near a major university football stadium and a Miller Lite crowd. Nick encouraged management to let him push the envelope a bit and he gradually upgraded the draught beer selection, including some interesting seasonals.

Owning his own pub seemed the logical next step, and the opportunity came when the Sandlot Bar went up for sale. The Sandlot was a neighborhood sports bar with a sand volleyball court and a lot of Miller Lite drinkers as customers. He took over and renamed it (Dexter is Zabel's dog) in October 2007 and began changing the beers in November. He selected craft beers that had been successful at Big 10, but was also cautious about not driving away the Sandlot's customer base.

He started with some Capital beers and Leinenkugel taps, among others, but when he added Lake Louie Scotch Ale it took off, becoming the third best selling beer after Miller Lite and New Glarus Spotted Cow. With that success, he started replacing more of the lighter "mainstream" beers with more assertive craft beers. Spotted Cow was the last of the lighter more mainstream craft beers to remain on tap, and he took that off two years ago (although Miller Lite remains on that thirteenth tap).

Everything worked out okay. He commented that beers like Leinenkugel or Spotted Cow become something of a “fallback” choice for a lot of people, but if you don’t offer it, it forces many people to think about trying something that’s new to them. He got a few complaints, but he said most people were willing to try other beers, and those customers are now ordering a lot of Bell’s Oberon, Magic Hat #9, and Lost Coast Tangerine Wheat.

Of the 12 taps craft beer taps, Zabel says he always tries to keep on at least one big Imperial stout or similar style, at least one hophead beer, one fruit beer, a couple of session beers and whatever interesting new beer has just come out. Although he may occasionally have a Belgian on tap, the focus is definitely on American micros with a selection of beers from local breweries (Capital, Lake Louie, Ale Asylum, et cetera), other Wisconsin beers (Central Waters), Michigan or other Midwestern beers (New Holland, Founder’s, Darkhorse, Bell’s, Three Floyd’s), and some east or west coast beers. Zabel hopes to add more taps by the end of the year to bring the total to 20. He also carries a selection of 60-70 bottled beers, about one-third of “popular” brands and the other two-thirds craft beers.

Zabel considers Dexter’s to be a neighborhood pub where people like good beer, but sees it slowly becoming a destination for beer enthusiasts from elsewhere in the city. He thinks that the opening of the nearby Malt House two summers ago has been good for his business and would like to see a third craft beer bar open nearby to make that part of the eastside even more of a craft beer destination.

### **Malt House**

Just a couple blocks over from Dexter’s Pub and across East Washington Avenue is one of the other corners of what a local beer blogger has called Madison’s “Beermuda Triangle.” (Ale Asylum, on the northeast side, is the distant third point.) Owner Bill Rogers had long been a homebrewer and beer enthusiast, while working in information technology for CUNA Mutual by day. CUNA, once considered to be one of the good places to work in Madison, had according to Rogers turned into a hostile working environment with changes in management and attempts to break the employee unions. Rogers decided to take a severance package and set out to see if he could turn his passion for beer into a way to make a living. Time will tell, but since opening the Malt House in June 2008, Rogers has certainly very quickly transformed an east Madison corner across from a failed Union Corners development project into an extremely popular craft beer spot. The Malt House is located in the former Union House Tavern building. Although the former tavern used to be a popular working class hangout offering cheap PBR draughts, the word “Union” in the name refers not to labor unions, but rather to the Union Army during the Civil War. A boarding house for Union soldiers used to stand right next to where the bar is now. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to state that beer has been served on that corner almost continuously since 1858, and a visitor to the Malt House will readily notice the attractive antique back bar and historical materials on the opposite wall.

But the beers, oh my, the beers! The Malt House boasts three six-tap towers each devoted to its own part of the draught beer menu, six taps each for Belgians, Wisconsin craft beers, and a changing selection of non-Belgian imports and non-Wisconsin micros. For Midwestern craft beers, it’s a little bit Dexter’s, and for the Belgians, it’s a little bit Maduro, perhaps offering the best of both worlds in one place. And unlike Maduro, no cigars if smoking is not your thing, and unlike Dexter’s, no sports on TV. By not having TVs and with music played only at a low background volume, Rogers has succeeded in creating a craft beer space where people can actually enjoy conversation with each other as they enjoy their beers. Bartenders at the Malt House are experienced in craft beer- two of them were long-time bartenders at Wonder’s Pub, one of whom also works at Dexter’s-and will readily make suggestions of beers to try if a customer is uncertain. You can count on finding at least one or two of the most recent local seasonal brews, as well as a beer or two that you just won’t find anywhere else in town. For example, the Malt House has offered vertical tastings with

three taps devoted to three different years of Sierra Nevada Bigfoot barley-wine. The draught selection changes frequently, so check the chalkboard for new choices. The Malt House also offers an extensive bottled selection, including some Belgians not routinely stocked at other local beer bars, some of which are discounted as part of the weekly “Trappist Tuesday” and “750 Saturdays” promotions.

### **Brasserie V**

In the old days, Madison’s east side was the “beer” side of town, the west side was wine. With a few exceptions (such as the Big10 Pub and the former J.T. Whitney’s brewpub, now Vintage), the west side simply didn’t have anyplace with a good selection of craft beers. But in 2007, Matt Van Nest set out to open a business that would change that. Brasserie V combines rustic French and Belgian foods with Belgian beers in a small eatery that has become popular among Monroe Street businesses and a select crowd of beer enthusiasts from throughout the area. By the way, the “V” in the restaurant name is pronounced as the first letter of the owner’s last name, not as the number five.

Van Nest spent most of his career in sales management, but has long had a general interest in craft beer. It was only later, however, that he came to love Belgian beers, with his introduction coming during a stop at the Map Room while on a pub crawl of Chicago. He had wanted to start a business someday anyway, and thought the lack of a place in Madison with a large selection of Belgian beers presented him with the right opportunity.

The commitment to Belgian beers (served in the proper glassware, of course) to accompany Brasserie V’s dinner staples of moules-frites, steak frites and duck is evident in the devotion of 9 or 10 of the 14 draught lines to Belgian beers, with the remainder going to US craft beers or other European beers. Like Maduro, Brasserie V has Abt 12 on full time, with Van Nest joking that it’s their “house beer.” Among the non-Belgian European beers, Van Nest likes to offer beers from very small breweries and will often have draughts not found elsewhere in town. Looking for an Imperial Stout from Italy? Brasserie V might have it. Including bottles, they offer a selection of about 150 different beers, 80% from Europe, at least half of those Belgian, and a handful of select U.S. beers.

Like some of the other area beer bars, tap lines at Brasserie V rotate frequently. Van Nest said he has tap changes almost daily, with most beers lasting 7-10 days.

He is gratified that the neighborhood has embraced Brasserie V so quickly and has a strong clientele who are willing to be adventurous in their choices. Although it is also popular among some beer enthusiasts, he notes that they “still have a lot of opportunity to build that “great beer” crowd, especially after 9pm.”

Brasserie V offers beer dinners about once a month.

### **jacs Dining and Tap House**

The current jacs originally opened as Monroe Street Bistro, and you would probably have been forgiven if you were to think of Monroe Street Bistro as “Brasserie V - II.” After all, not only is it also on Monroe Street, offering a selection of Belgian beers, and with some similarities in the type of menu, it was also opened by some of the original principals of Brasserie V. Local media made some of the same comparisons when it opened in August 2008. Over the course of the first year the bistro started to move in its own direction, a change which was further accelerated after a partial change in ownership and the transition to jacs.

The menu at jacs is rustic European-style cuisine, locally-sourced when possible, that goes well with craft beers. Originally, the beer selection was modeled after Brasserie V’s Belgian focus, with about three-quarters of the 15 taps devoted to Belgian beers and the other quarter Wisconsin and other American micros. Now the proportions are almost reversed, and jacs keeps St. Bernardus and Duchesse on tap full-time. They also have a bottled beer selection. Also unlike Brasserie V, jacs has a full liquor license and does a significant amount of business in spirits and wines in addition to the beers.

Tasting flights of whiskies are popular.

General manager Rebecca Mergen was the beer buyer and bar manager during the Monroe Street Bistro days. She is passionate about beer and that passion is present in everything about jacs. The menu offers a beer for every dish. Staff are carefully trained to ask customers about their tastes and be able to make solid beer recommendations for them. Furthermore, the entire staff participates in making suggestions for selecting new beers. Beer is a very social beverage for Mergen and her customers. If you aren't sure about what you might want, tasting flights are available, thereby encouraging exploration.

Mergen very much wants jacs to be a neighborhood restaurant with a strong local clientele. In addition to all of the great beers, jacs distinguishes itself in its menu in at least a couple of ways; a children's menu makes it more appealing as a family place, they offer a variety of gluten-free options for people with dietary restrictions, and most of the menu items can be prepared gluten-free with the careful attention needed to avoid cross-contamination.

Whether you go to jacs for the beer or for the food (ideally both), you will not be disappointed.

### **Old Fashioned**

When the Old Fashioned opened in 2005 on Madison's Capitol Square there was little indication that it would later become one of Madison's multi-tap craft beer bars. It was, instead, an urban variation on the old-time Wisconsin supper club with a menu of Wisconsin home-style "comfort food," and an emphasis on products from Wisconsin producers whenever possible. To be sure, there were some good beers on tap, beers from Wisconsin. It was one of the first places in Madison, for example, to serve Sand Creek's Wild Ride IPA on a fairly regular basis.

But in January 2009 the Old Fashioned embarked on a new campaign to feature beers from as many Wisconsin breweries as possible. They expanded the draught selection to 29 tap lines, and between draught and bottles have about 150 different beers from 54 different Wisconsin breweries, including some not available elsewhere in Madison. Indeed, manager Jennifer DeBolt personally drives to 11 of those 54 breweries to pick up beers that aren't normally distributed in Madison. She'll probably be doing a lot more driving around for beer if she follows through with a plan to double the draught selection!

DeBolt remarked that having an extensive Wisconsin beer selection was always part of the business plan, it just took a while to implement. Part of it, of course, was simply learning more about beer, and DeBolt invested a great deal of her time in reading more about beer, taking brewery tours and getting to know many of the brewers in Wisconsin.

Training staff to make good beer recommendations is a high priority for DeBolt. Each server must complete four hours of beer training and pass a written test on the basics of craft beer. She also takes staff along on brewery tours and provides "cheat sheets" on the new beers, which include alternate suggestions for responses to customers who say they like a particular beer not served there.

The Old Fashioned offers a number of promotions to help open people's eyes (and palates) to Wisconsin craft beers--a "beer of the month" at a discounted price, two-for-one "Double Bubble" happy hours that encourage people to try different beers, and the occasional five-for-\$5 surprise beer buckets, which helps rotate the bottle stock frequently enough to assure freshness. The beer bucket idea was a response to the challenge of maintaining a large menu of bottles despite knowing that the bottles do not sell as frequently as draught beers. Staff choose the beers served in the beer buckets based on which beers need to be rotated out, but DeBolt says they always include good beers, and it's also an opportunity for customers to try something they might not have had before. The beers in this "inventory clearance" special are usually gone in three days. Tasting flights of 4, 8, 12, or 16 beers are also available on request.

Another challenge is in dealing with seasonal beers. With 29 taps, you

can't devote six different lines to bocks at the same time, but she also doesn't want to turn away brewers promoting their seasonal beers. Instead, she'll buy the kegs and rotates them in on that brewery's tap line as other breweries' seasonal beers of the same style go offline.

DeBolt is happy to see that the new beer program has taken off beyond her original expectations, and plans to add new features, such as three-ounce tasting flights. For anyone visiting Madison and interested in getting a one-stop beer tour of the state, the Old Fashioned is a "must" stop.

### **Cabana Room**

Flying somewhat "under the radar" in Madison's good beer community is the Cabana Room, located between the Capitol and the UW campus. As the more casual and affordable sibling of Samba Brazilian Grill upstairs, Cabana Room is starting to get more attention for its beer beyond the graduate student and faculty campus crowd.

The casual upscale atmosphere of the lower level offers a menu of burgers, "Cubano"-style grilled sandwiches, and Brazilian-accented stews and salads, any of which goes well with one of the 33 beers on tap. Beer manager Jim Murphy was an 18-year veteran bartender from Wonder's Pub. The Wonder's Pub connections run deep in any discussion of Madison beer bars, but Murphy's friendship with Wonder's owner Steve Weakly predates Wonder's to when both of them worked at the Madison Club. "Murph" credits Weakly for inspiring his interest in microbrewery beers.

Unlike some of the other places, the draught list at Cabana Room does not change frequently. Murphy notes that the beer menu remains much the same because management prefers to have a long-term printed menu that changes only a couple of times a year, but adds that he still gets to rotate six or seven of the beers because of listings for particular breweries' seasonals and for "Murph's Beer du Jour."

Murphy's relationships with brewers and distributors during his many years in the industry often enables him to get special beers before other bars in Madison. An example was Capital Brewery's limited release "Hop Bock." His enthusiasm for good beer is readily evident. On a number of occasions, Murphy has gone to his box of brewery sell-sheets behind the bar to show select patrons a particular beer he is interested in putting on tap. He also encourages customers who might be uncertain about what to order to try a sampler flight. For regulars, signing up for Cabana Room's "Murphy's Beer Club" tour qualifies you for special perks as you progress toward filling the card.

The same beers available at Cabana Room are also available at the bars upstairs if you are dining at Samba.