

Montreal, a surprising beer destination!

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Montreal is a great place to enjoy French sophistication and chic fashion (the good sister accompanying me made me say that), but more importantly it can also be an outstanding place to find a good beer. People might speak French in Montreal, but given the relatively good nature of the populace and the number of quality brewpubs centered around downtown, a visit to this city is far removed from any deservedly maligned large French metropolis. Like many travelers to foreign soil, my first thoughts once I touch down tend to center on finding good beer. This is especially true now given that cheap airlines are no longer handing out free booze on many international flights. I usually try to prepare with some internet searches and often find bits and pieces of what I need in order to plan my assault on the unsuspecting brewpubs and beer bars. After returning from this most recent trip to Montreal it occurred to me that I should jot down a few of my notes for others in case they to someday head to the city and want to visit some worthwhile places. My hope is of course that others will follow suit and share similar beer guides in the future. All of the following brewpubs are unique in a Franco, "I thumb my nose in your general direction" way, but don't take my word for it, visit them yourself and let me know what you think.

After finding a street map and referencing the various comments downloaded on the internet I set out for a very long mission, to visit all of the brewpubs in the city (OK I missed one, but you try to find it – read on). My first stop was Brewtopia on trendy Crescent Street, the most central for downtown visitors. The traditional English style pub makes eight beers, including a blonde, raspberry, brown, honey blonde, an IPA on hand pump, and hosts a number of other locals including a hemp ale. The brewer uses an English ale yeast for all varieties and the beer was generally good, although nothing stood out. After a quick couple of pints I was ready to begin walking east to St. Denis Street off of which most of the other brewpubs are located. Be advised it is a long walk east to St. Denis and you might want to catch a cab there or look for a subway.

Walking north on St. Denis, the first brewpub that greets you should not be taken as an indication of what awaits you further up the road. A new brewpub trying to capture that Bennigan-esque ambiance so many places like Two Rows back home seems to have perfected, is the 3 Brasseurs on St. Denis south of Ontario Street. This overly commercial looking brewpub, which appears to focus on food rather than beer, carries a blonde, amber, brown, and blanche, all of which must use the same Belgian yeast strain. If you go crawling don't end on this one (unless you love Belgian everything). Just try the samples first before committing to a full pint.

Further north off St. Denis you come across Le Cheval Blanc, Montreal's first brewpub opened in 1987, located in a funky neighborhood that at first seems a little seedy. The interior of the bar is just as funky as the hood it's in. Adorned with green marble Formica walls and red diner booths dimly lit by 60's era Chinese lanterns, the place is a must see for anyone visiting the city. Adding to the other-world like atmosphere are two stainless fermentation vessels protruding through the floor into plexiglass spheres from the

basement below. Alas, the beer was not what I had hoped. If you love Belgian ales you might like the place because the brewer uses the same Belgian strain for all his ales, including stouts (I didn't have time to try the lagers, but supposedly he uses a different yeast). Beers on tap included a stout, bitter, blonde, blanche (no surprise there), piment (a chili lager), and a Vienna lager.

A few more blocks back on St. Denis, L'Amere a Boire is a three level café/brewpub with a cozy beergarden that serves some very good pints and carries a few less mainstream styles. After drinking a number of Belgian inspired creations at my two previous stops, I was by now ready to drink any decent non-Belgian beer I could find, luckily this place had quite a few. Among the offerings were a Czech pilsner, a cask Baltic porter, schwartzbier, blanche, English porter, vollbier, red ale, and a cask pale. All beers are a CAN \$1 off before 8pm, and they also serve pitchers that range between CAN \$12 to 15. The bar is also a full service café with munchies like French fries and mayonnaise for only CAN \$3.25! Yum! The fairly popular hangout is located at 2049 St Denis (on a section of the road that seems a little like the Heights area).

Marching onwards and upwards on a parallel running street, La Sargent Recruteur is a traditional looking English-style pub and brewpub located at 4650 St. Laurent. I walked from Cheval and Amere, but to save about 30 minutes take a cab which will get you there in a few minutes for about US \$5. A small cozy place, La Sargent wins hands down for atmosphere and the beer isn't bad either. The interior is decorated with lots of beer bottles, which reminded me a little of the Gingerman, but unlike our hometown beer mecca, La Sargent doesn't sell any bottled beer (is this an example of French humor I wondered?). Who cares they had good draft beer and some cask ale. On tap they had a stout, blanche, red ale, ginger helles, blonde ale, cream ale, and a cask bitter (in my humble opinion better than the cask at Amere a Boire). They also had a few visitor taps including some St. Amboise varieties. Pints before 8pm were CAN \$4.25, thereafter they pick one tap to put on special.

Within walking distance from Sargent is Deiu du Ciel, considered the most innovated, and seemingly the most popular, brewpub in the city. The eleven house offerings included an imperial scotch ale at 9% ABV, abbey ales, brown, IPA etc., and a very impressive vanilla and cocoa infused stout called Aphrodesiac (probably the "best" I had the entire trip, but not really good as a session beer). The only real drawback I noticed (after visiting twice two days in a row) was the space. Set in a small building located north of the downtown area on St. Laurent and Laurier with the equipment located under the bar, the seating area gets very full very quickly and crowds can form as early as 6pm, even on weekdays. I guess that's what happens when you offer some of the city's best beers. The place also offers a CAN \$3.75/pint happy hour from 3pm to 7pm. Brewmaster and owner Jean Francois Gravel, an avid homebrewer, was there each afternoon I visited and seems to be doing some good work.

A visit to each of these brewpubs is possible on foot, although you might want to catch a taxi for part of it (unless you like long walks in a drunken stupor). Brutopia is located in the center of town and should be visited first or last (they do have live bands on the

weekends). A possible route for visiting the rest might begin walking up St. Denis, getting 3 Brasseurs out of the way, then continuing to Cheval Blanc (for more Belgian tasting brews), and then on to Amere a Boire. There is one more brewpub we were told just opened on Rachel Street called the Reservoir that could be visited next, but we could never find the damn place (we were told it was very hard to find and did not yet have a sign – another example of French humor perhaps?). Someone go and find it and let me know what it's like. (On a later trip we visited and found it a very chic Asian inspired brewpub with a hit and miss line up of beers). After Amere catch a cab (or you will be walking for a half hour) straight up St. Denis to Le Sargent before ending at Dieu du Ciel for arguably the best beer in Montreal. In general, I would tend to argue Toronto has a better beer scene (this is no longer the case in 2008), with more variety and certainly more authentic English-style ales, but Montreal certainly holds its own, especially for those with a palate for lighter and Belgian inspired brews. But don't take my word for it, take a trip and see for yourself. Just remember to bring me back some St. Amboise Stout.