

JOE SIXPACK



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Joe Sixpack: Adventurer seeks to re-create centuries-old Arctic Ale



By Joe Sixpack
Philadelphia Daily News
Daily News Beer Reporter

IN 1852, the British government dispatched Royal Navy Cmdr. Edward Belcher and a fleet of five ships to the Canadian Arctic to search for the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin. They came up empty, and four of Belcher's ships - including the H.M.S. Resolute - were abandoned in the ice.

Years later, the Resolute was discovered adrift, salvaged, returned to Britain and disassembled. Its timbers were used to craft a pair of matching desks for the queen of England and the president of the United States.

If the story sounds familiar, that's because you may have seen it in the Nicolas Cage movie "National Treasure 2: Book of Secrets."

What you almost certainly have never heard, however, is the story of the ship's beer.

A Bethlehem, Pa., homebrewer with a thirst for history has unearthed that story and will attempt to re-create the beer this summer during his own Arctic expedition.

"I want to tell the world this great story," said Christopher Bowen, "because it really hasn't been told the way it should've been told."

The beer was **Allsopp's Arctic Ale**, a bottled barleywine brewed in Burton, England. Made with just under 12 percent alcohol so as to survive the frigid temperatures of the north, it was described by Belcher as "a valuable antiscorbutic" for its ability to fight scurvy.

With all that alcohol, it aged especially well.

In 1895, a British admiral who had carried bottles to the north during a separate expedition two decades earlier marveled at its staying power.

"The special qualities which rendered this ale so valuable for the purposes of the expedition were its strength and nutritive qualities," wrote Adm. A.H. Markham. "Its color is a rich brown and its flavor is suggestive of old Madeira. It is today as sound as on the day of its birth 20 years ago."

Samuel Allsopp & Sons continued to brew the beer into the 20th century, but eventually the bottles dwindled and finally disappeared.

In 2007, a 155-year-old bottle from Belcher's expedition showed up on eBay and fetched an astonishing \$500,000 bid. That offer turned out to be bogus, but it caught Bowen's imagination.

"I started reading everything I could about the beer and the expedition," he said.

A married father of two, Bowen, 43, is a financial planner and an avid home brewer. He won the Great American Beer Festival's pro-am contest two years ago. He's also an amateur historian and curator of a brewing-history exhibit in his hometown.

And he's a recreational motorcyclist.

"Somehow," Bowen said, "I decided to put together all of my interests and create an adventure."

This summer, Bowen and two riding partners will hop on their bikes and head 2,000 miles north to the upper reaches of Hudson Bay. They'll set up camp, collect glacial water and, using 19th-century methods, brew 100 gallons of Arctic Ale outdoors.

"I did a good bit of research to come up with the original recipe," Bowen said.

While it's fermenting, they'll continue their trek another 1,200 miles north to desolate Beechey Island, where Franklin buried three of his crew members.

Then they'll bring the beer back to Pennsylvania, dry-hop it and age it in oak barrels.

It's bound to be a great yarn, and Bowen will bring along a documentary film crew to record the events.

Meanwhile, Bowen has begun revealing details on his Facebook page (search for "Arctic Alchemy"), creating a buzz in homebrewing circles.

Some day, Bowen hopes, a bottle of this 21st-century Arctic Ale will make its way to the Oval Office. There, he imagines, the president will raise a toast while seated at the Resolute Desk.

"Joe Sixpack" by Don Russell appears weekly in Big Fat Friday. For more on the beer scene in Philly and beyond, visit www.foesixpack.net. Send e-mail to foesixpack@phillynews.com.



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