

The Suds Emporium

Boston's Commonwealth Brewing Co. is a Mecca for lovers of the amber stuff

MY DRINKING COMPANION and I are at the Commonwealth Brewing Co., a Boston pub that serves ambrosial English-style draft ale, brewed fresh on the premises. In Boston, the Commonwealth is the Source. Coming here for beer is like driving out to a dairy for milk—if not drawing up a stool right under the cow.

Despite its name, the Brewing Co. bottles only a small portion of its brew for retail sale. The rest is consumed here at the long bar and at the two dozen tables scattered about. Nevertheless, the place *feels* like a brewery. It is big and bold and industrial-strength, with copper everything. Five antique copper brewing kettles, each one as big as a rocket module, dominate the room. Their images burn in the copper tabletops, the copper bar top and even the copper ventilation pipes overhead.

Only one of the kettles, the one in the window, is actually used to boil beer. (Two of them are walk-in refrigerators, the others merely ornamental.) Downstairs, the hot brew is fermented in stainless-steel vats and conditioned in enormous tanks. Then it is drunk.

The barkeep has kindly lined up today's selections on the bar in front of us. The tall, fluted glasses stand like six notes from a glass harmonica, each one with its own tone. Unlike the monochrome stuff Americans have become used to, these lovely liquids range in color from golden honey to dark coffee; even the suds have personality. Some climb the glass like snowdrifts; some rise in wispy curds; others lie like a pool of whipped cream over Viennese coffee. There's a mild golden ale, whose smoothness is not to be mistaken for lassitude; a sturdier, more muscle-bound amber; a dark, piercing Burton Bitter; a hefty, meaty classic stout; a pale but zesty blond ale; and, finally, a blow-'em-away porter. It is a heady experience to "play" each note, to feel the taste explode in a mouth long dulled by listless mass-market fare.

The Commonwealth Brewing Co. was founded, in 1986, as one of Boston's contributions to the Eighties' micro-brewery renaissance in America. It was begun by an unlikely triumvirate of one dreamy Englishman, Richard Wrigley, best known for developing an electric car, and two Chinese-Americans, Jeff Lee, a venture capitalist, and Alexander Chu.

The essential concept of English beer in Boston had a few kinks in it, though. Wrigley, the idea man, had



The confines are conducive to a heady experience or two.

assumed that Boston was filled with cosmopolitans thirsting for authentic British ales. But most Bostonians were not quite ready for beer that is served warm and is disturbingly flat and bitter—to the uneducated palate, that is. "The first few months, all we saw in here was people wincing after they took their first sip. They'd try the beer and go 'Ugh! What is this stuff?'" says Jim Lee, Jeff's brother, who joined the team when Wrigley departed, in 1989.

The company regrouped, adding a German-style beer: Served cold, the blond ale is closer to American tastes. And gradually the good word spread. In 1990, in a depressed Boston restaurant-and-bar market, the Commonwealth saw its business increase by 25 percent. It could go farther. Located on Portland Street, a short walk from Boston Garden, the pub has not yet caught on with the Bruins or the Celtics, but, Jim Lee says, "it is very popular with visiting teams."

My friend and I have sounded each note of the glass harmonica now. I have to admit that I favor the blond ale, the most American one. (I also admire the porter.) My sophisticated friend goes for the stout. We set down the last glass, wipe away our mustaches of froth and see our smiles reflected in copper all around us.

—JOHN SEDGWICK