The Malt Advocate Awards program is established to recognize the outstanding products and individuals in the beer and whisky industries. This, our sixth annual awards feature, recognizes outstanding performance in 1999. To be eligible, products must have been available for purchase in the United States during the 1999 calendar year. Winners are chosen from all products sampled by the Malt Advocate staff. They are selected from an elite group of products that we feel are the best within their given style, exhibiting the greatest character and complexity. The winners are, in our opinion, the best of the best. The brewery and distillery of the year are also chosen from companies that have made products available in the United States during 1999. The winners are chosen based upon a combination of innovation, industry leadership, and an overall excellence in their line of drinks.

Individual recognition is for accomplishments in the beer and whisky industries relating to products that are sold within the United States. To win the award, individuals are first selected by Malt Advocate as the greatest contributors in 1999 to the advancement of the industry in their particular profession (brewer, importer, distiller, writer, etc.). Then a winner is selected from this elite group. The awards, and the winners, are outlined here.
Import Beer of the Year

Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier Urbock

Do you like smoked food? Do you disdain smoke-flavored foods for the real thing? Do you flip over barbecue, 'cue, slow-cooked over a hickory fire that sends smoke right out over the road? Do you hunt out German delis with the best Westphalian hams, rauchfleisch, and double-smoked bacon? We like all that, and smoked cheese, smoked nuts, smoked sausage, smoked duck, smoked fish...and smoked beer, rauchbier.

Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier Urbock, from Brauerei Heller of Bamberg, Franconia, Germany, is the big boy when it comes to smoked beer. Its "little brother," the Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier Märzen, is a beer on many a beer-lover's top-ten list. We still love little brother, but lieber Gott, the Urbock is a stunning way to fill a glass. The tale of the tape shows what you're up against, Märzen vs. Urbock: Original Gravity—13.5 P vs. 17.5 P; Bittering Units—32 vs. 40; ABV—5.4% vs. 6.6%. Please, sir, we want more.

Anheuser-Busch can keep "beechwood-aged," beechwood-smoked works a lot better for us. That's where this beer's amazing aroma and taste originate. As in a peaty Scotch, the flavor comes from kilning the malt over a smoky fire, only in this case it is beechwood logs burning below, not half-fossilized bog moss. The smoke comes through magnificently, reminiscent of a deeply smoked Gouda cheese.

At the exciting moment when you are first face to face with the Urbock, you might expect that the beer would be bigger in all directions, including smoke. Momentary disappointment may greet the discovery that this is not so; the level of smokiness is no more (or less) than that of the Märzen. There is the same smoky aroma, somewhere between a campfire and smoked cheese freshly carved off the wheel, and some fullness of malt. The flavor at first seems somewhat tamer than the Märzen, full-bodied yet somehow cleaner of smoke.

This fear vanishes with a quick palate calibration. There is not more smoke here, but there is a lot more beer here, bocks-worth more beer, and it is this heavy freight of malt that is mellowing the smoke. This is the beauty of the Urbock. Where raising the intensity of the beer makes a delightfully bigger beer, raising the intensity of the smoke might only make a beer that few would truly enjoy. As it is, the Schlenkerla Urbock is a mighty mugfull that invites deep quaffing with a dual richness that is hard to match.

Someday we will sit by the river Regnitz in Bamberg and pull slowly at a tall glass of Urbock, perhaps with a ham and onion sandwich. Until then, we will drink from the bottle and be grateful.

Domestic Beer of the Year

Dogfish Head Raison D'Étre

When Dogfish Head first opened as a half-barrel brewpub in the oceanside town of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, the local beer press yawned. Sam Calagione's first beers included a blackberry wheat and a maple porter, slight departures from the norm but hardly exciting ones. Then the little brewpub spawned a little brewery, and all of a sudden the little brewery was brewing very big, ground-breaking beers. We're proud to say that we were one of the first to notice this, and have encouraged Sam and head brewer Jason Kennedy in whatever ways we could, including the pleasant work of sampling their beers at every opportunity.

Raison D'Étre ("reason to be") is the payoff. While we've raved about other Dogfish Head beers like Immortal Ale and Aprithop, other brewers make big beers and really good fruit beers. Raison D'Étre is different, and not in a "dry-hopped roasted rye doublebock" kind of way. This is a beer that cannot be stylistically pigeon-holed with so much as a point of origin. Brewery press materials tag it as a "big brown ale" but Sam admits that's more a reference to the beer's rich mahogany color than to any stylistic heritage.

Here's how it comes about. As the first runnings come off the mash, they are poured into a 50-gallon tank, where they are mixed with Madagascar brown sugar, Belgian beet sugar, and green raisins ("They're a less-dried grape," Sam explains) and brought to a boil by direct flame, which causes some caramelization. The main boil chugs along with additions of Northern Brewer and Target hops, and as a big dose of finishing hops (Magnum, Eroica, and Fuggles) are added, the small boil is put in as well. The beer is first fermented with Dogfish's house ale yeast, then a second fermentation takes place with a Belgian yeast Sam refuses to name. After two