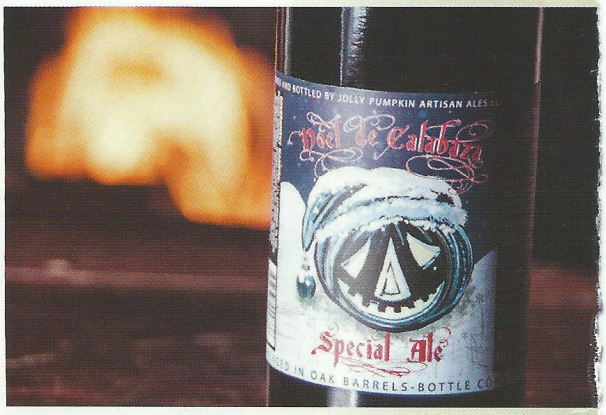
Roll out the barrel

Savor robust craft brews throughout the state with an array of seasonal packages, pairings, tours and events this winter.

BY TAI ALEXANDER



"Finding the source (as my husband Chris says) has led us to adventures we would have otherwise missed. With every beer, I learn more about our state, its people and the plethora of fun it has to offer."
— Kerry McLean

WITH ITS BLEND of fresh water and creative talent, Michigan's craft beer industry is taking the state and the country by storm. Ranking fifth nationwide in breweries — already over 130 and counting — the Great Beer State is a burgeoning market for unique brews.

As such, a thriving avenue for seasonal winter brews has also evolved — beers boasting heavy chocolate, coffee and caramel flavors that equate to a full, toasted feeling from the inside out on the coldest days (and nights!). Paired with a winter brew, classic fare like stews, soups and other hearty meals catapult to a new culinary experience.

"Whether using flavorful fruits and spices in holiday beers or brewing a high-gravity Imperial Stout, Belgian Tripel or Winter Warmer, this is the time of year when the brewers get to craft full-bodied, rich beers," says Eric Briggeman, long-time president of the Michigan Brewers Guild and director of brewing operations for Rochester Mills Beer Co. in Rochester and Auburn Hills.

The bourbon-barrel-aged Snow Dazed Winter Ale from Rochester Mills is the perfect beer for those cold winter nights. With plenty of flavor and a good balance of malt and hops, its dark brown copper hue and higher alcohol content make it an ideal companion for robust dishes like roast turkey, bread pudding and cheeses like cheddar, Asiago and Colby.

Delivering a smooth, rich, creamy flavor with pronounced malt character and brewed strong to help fend of the cold weather chill, the Winter Marzen from Cheboygan Brewing Co. is another gift in a glass.

Known for its vast array of unique flavors, Short's Brewing Company in Bellaire delivers countless options for seasonal sipping. The Wintertime Fun Ale, available exclusively at the tap room, is a deep brown English Strong Ale. Brewed with milk chocolate, marshmallow, cinnamon and peppermint, it's a pleasant grab bag of flavors and aromas.

There's also New Holland's Cabin Fever, a brown ale that appeals to a variety of palates and extends comfort in just as many ways: Its rich character is fit for the stock pot, too, as an ingredient in seasonal roasts, soups and stews.

And then — "Conceived in a dimly lit room on a blistery cold night in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan" — the Reserve Special Black Ale from Dark Horse Brewing in Marshall is a hefty brew touted for its incredible thick presence on the pour and being dark as a starless night in the glass.

Though not much can beat savoring your favorite in a hefty mug at home by a crackling fire as the wind chill drops, ordering up a glass at the brewery or pub where it's crafted creates a whole new level of enjoyment. And — with countless breweries spread out through Michigan's two peninsulas — there's no shortage of nearby locales to claim

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY NORTH PEAK BREWING CO. (TOP RIGHT); GRIFFIN CLAW BREWERY & ROCHESTER MILLS BEER CO. (TOP LEFT); SCHMOHZ BREWERY (MIDDLE); CHEBOYGAN BREWING CO. (BOTTOM)

ur pint or sampler.

"Finding the source (as my husband Chris s) has led us to adventures we would have herwise missed," shares Michigan Brewers ild Enthusiast Kerry McLean in the 2014 tion of Michigan — the Great Beer State gazine ("Traveling Michigan, Brewery Brewery," page 20, mibeer.com). "With ry beer, I learn more about our state, its ple and the plethora of fun it has to offer."

A few top brewery stops

In a state steeped in pride for its strong- ted agricultural heritage, "beercations" the latest draw for visitors seeking flavor- experiences. "Travel focused on the craft ewing industry is a hot ticket," expresses Michigan Brewers Guild (mibeer.com/ er-tourism). "Some communities are even fering special hotel and spa packages, ique transportation and tours, ale trails d even brew-your-own options."

While becoming a Michigan Brewers ild Enthusiast ($45 annual mbership) includes VIP urs & Tastings through- the state at participat- member brewpubs, ong other benefits, and guild highlights more n a few beer-centric com- nities in the Great Lakes te online, following are few ted tours and special events t inspire dashing through the w to regional breweries this season.

Grand Rapids: Voted BeerCity USA 2012 and 2013, ranked among the Top 10 st Vacation Cities for Beer Lovers (thest t.com) and home to Hopcat, rated #1 ewpub in the U.S. (ratebeer.com), Grand pids serves up a craft beer tour map that kes forging your own path to over 30 lo- craft breweries easy (experiencegr.com/ taurants/craft-beer).

Personalized, guided tours offering a hind-the-scenes look at everything from menting to bottling are also offered at unders and Brewery Vivant, with in- er views available, too, at the Tap Room Schmohz Brewery (experiencegr.com/ ngs-to-do/tours/beer).

Special Event: 10th Annual Winter Beer Festival on Friday, Feb. 27 (3-7 p.m.) and Saturday, Feb. 28 (1-6 p.m.) at Fifth Third Ball Park in Comstock Park, just north of Grand Rapids. This past season's celebration showcased 88 Michigan breweries and almost 800 different craft beers (mi beer.com).

Kalamazoo: Bearing accolades from such sources as U.S. World & News Report ("8 Undervalued Beer Cities in the World," April 2014), Business Insider (#3 Beer Town in America, 2013) and liveability.com (#4 Top Beer City, 2012), Kalamazoo is home to the state's oldest and largest producer, Bell's Brewery, Inc., and is punctuated by an array of intriguing local breweries, brew-centric restaurants and pubs, over half of which are within walking distance from one another (discoverkalamazoo.com/kalamazoo-brewery-map-177).

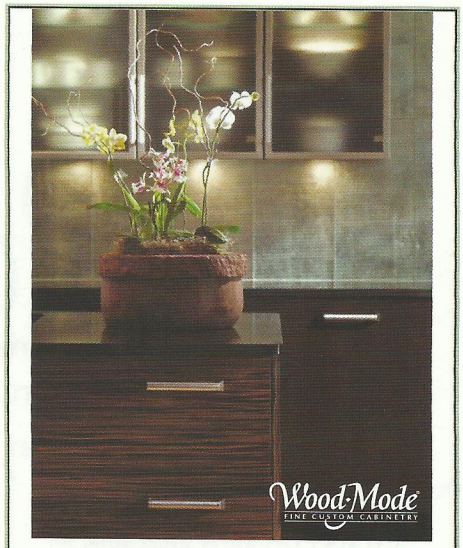
Special Event: Venture to Bell's on Dec. 5 for the brewery's 14th Annual "Eccentric Day." As the name implies, this amply-attended, day-long celebration (which kicks off bright and right at 9 a.m.) only admits those in unconventional attire (bellsbeer.com).

Traverse City: Cited by Draft magazine as one of America's three newest Emerging Beer Towns, this renowned culinary region's locally-grown flair is ever-catapulting in large part to TC's burgeoning craft brew scene, both in downtown pubs and tap rooms near Grand Traverse Bay and stretching out along Old Mission and Leelanau peninsulas. Brewmasters here are especially noted for their adventurous experimentation with local ingredients and unique flavor offerings.

Special Event: Winter Microbrew & Music Fest, Feb. 7 (4-10 p.m.), an outdoor celebration combining live entertainment, craft beer and local bites in heated tents at The Village at Grand Traverse Commons (traversecity.com; microbrewandmusic.com).

For more events and to learn more about Michigan: The Great Beer State, visit mi beer.com. ≈

Tai Alexander is a northern Michigan freelance writer.



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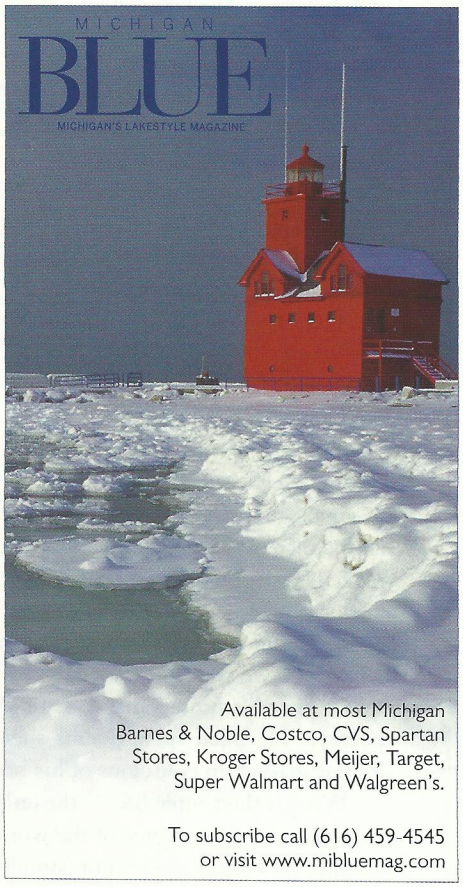

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