

Rye-Barrel-Aged Old Rasputin XVIII North Coast Brewing Company, Fort Bragg, California, US 11.3% ABV

After spending time in the UK drinking beer, Mark Ruedrich returned home the US with an insatiable thirst for full flavored ales. So in 1988 when he co-founded North Coast Brewing Co. in Fort Bragg, California, he set out as brewmaster to brew beers rich in flavor and texture, combining inspiration from the UK with attitude and hops from the West Coast of the US. This resulted in now-classic beers like dry-hopped Red Seal Ale and Old No. 38 Stout. Like other American craft brewers, he was never satisfied with things as they were, and he has always been at the forefront of beer experimentation, producing special high-ABV beers with annual “vintage” release dates, Belgian-style strong ales and saisons, and barrel-aged beers before these sorts of beers became fashionable, gilded lilies of the craft beer scene.

North Coast’s beloved Old Rasputin Russian Imperial Stout, first brewed in 1997, is on most brewers’ shortlist of most-influential beers. This dark, roasty, bitter stout is elegant and balanced in all its 9% ABV glory, and Mark was inspired by Bert Grant’s Imperial Stout, but chose to increase the hop qualities in order to build Old Rasputin’s flavor on what he calls a “resinous foundation” from the hops. Far from an overly bitter beer, however, Old Rasputin still plays true to Imperial Stout’s 18th-Century history: it envelops that bitterness in a blanket of rich, roasted maltiness, and it never lets the high alcohol get too warm or too coarse. In 1998, to celebrate his brewery’s 10-year anniversary, Ruedrich (pronounced “REE-drick”) brewed a Belgian dubbel and aged a bit of it in some hard-to-come-by used Jack Daniel’s whiskey barrels. Goose Island’s Bourbon County Stout, first brewed in 1992, is credited as the first craft beer to meet a bourbon barrel, and this expensive aging process was very rare in the ‘90s, a time when the majority of craft beer was wheat beer, pale ale, and brown ale. North Coast’s 10th Anniversary barrel-aged dubbel was a big hit at the brewery, but Mark didn’t age another beer in barrels until 2007, this time to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Old Rasputin, and he’s been barrel-aging ever since.

Barrels have become expensive for brewers to purchase, and many breweries reuse their barrels two or three times, but North Coast uses only “first-use” barrels, a beer industry term for barrels’ first and most-flavorful use for beer after they leave the distillery. Furthermore, North Coast barrel-ages its beers for no less than 12 months, often up to 18 months. This is a long (read: expensive) aging process, and longer than many breweries can afford to devote to their beers’ barrel aging, but it’s the only way Mark and his brewing team, including brewmasters Chuck Martins and Pat Broderick, want to do it to really impart the fullest barrel flavors and smoothness to their beers. Mark sees it as an enhancement and evolution of Old Rasputin (toward the ethereal, in my opinion). The beer in Old Rasputin XVIII spent close to 18 months in close to a hundred Willett rye whisky barrels, slowly mellowing, aging, micro-oxygenating, evaporating the angel’s share, and soaking up flavors and rye from the barrels (Mark says the barrels in this batch were “pretty hot” when the beer went in them), going from 9% ABV up to 11.3% ABV.

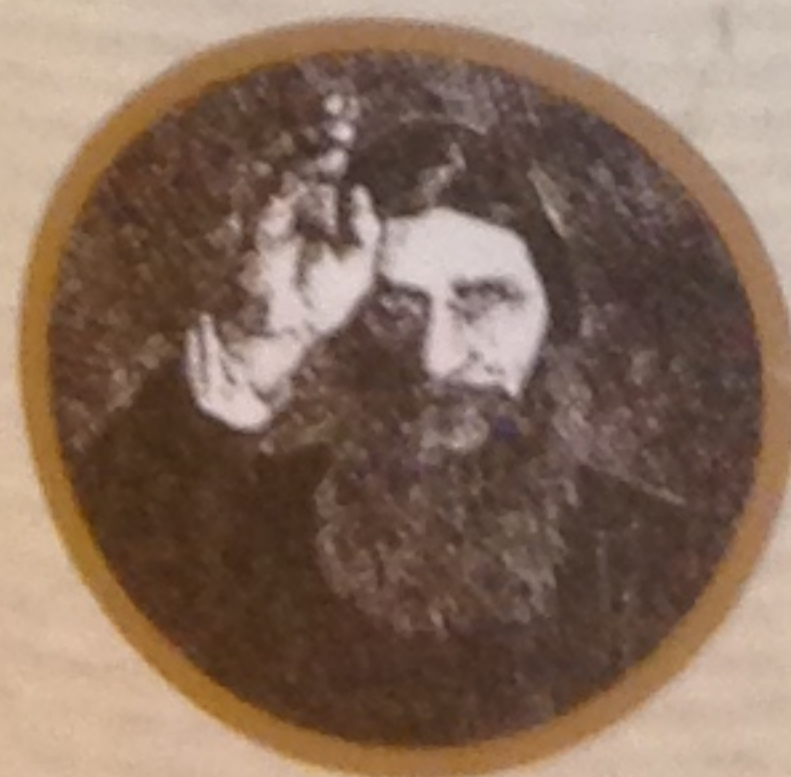
A couple notes about the bottle and label. First, the beer is not bottle-conditioned, so you can go ahead and pour it all without worrying about yeast at the bottom of the bottle. And second, Mark’s starting to kick himself for choosing to use Roman numerals for the labels — X was easy, XVIII is getting a tad cumbersome. But as a shout-out to his six long-time employees who immigrated decades ago from the Yucatan, he’s added the Mayan symbol for 18 to this year’s label — at the bottom of the label, 3 bars count for 15 and 3 dots add another 3.

Old Rasputin XVIII pours black-brown into the glass, sitting beneath a thin veil of tan foam like a motherlode of chocolate beneath toasty pie crust. Its intense aroma of baking chocolate, coffee, and caramelly whiskey can be smelled several inches away from the glass. It smells like a combo of spicy,

oaked red Rioja, rye whiskey, and boozy stout all at once, laced with hints of marshmallow, bacon, brown sugar, and cigar tobacco. The beer drinks magnificently, somehow capturing the pure essence of roasted almonds, dark chocolate, Italian espresso, toasted coconut, and burnt caramel, framing it all in the bittersweetness of malt, hops, and warming, numbing, cozy ethanol. Long months in oak have offered a soft tannic structure to the mouthfeel, offset a bit by the beer's high carbonation. The finish is long, luscious, and languid, stopping only to allow oak tannins and peppery spice to beg another sip. Enjoy it with salty, spiced dishes like Chinese 5-spice duck with hoisin, shiitakes and ginger stir-fry with black forbidden rice, or beef short ribs braised with cinnamon and ancho chiles. It's phenomenal with desserts, too, whether chocolate, caramel, vanilla, or fruit: chocolate budino with red currant reduction, brown butter blueberry pancakes with bacon maple syrup, and vanilla ice cream with cider-caramel sauce would all rejoice with this beer. Or else, just hold onto this beer until after dinner and enjoy it on its own with your feet up by the fireplace.

RASPUTIN
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BARREL-AGED
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RUSSIAN IMPERIAL STOUT
XVIII
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