

ESCAPES

Brew, beach time warm the soul in Dogfishland

BY MELANIE D. G. KAPLAN

On a chilly Friday afternoon in November, my friend Devon and I cozied up to the bar at the Dogfish Head Brewery tasting room in Milton, Del., and each jotted with a golf pencil a list of four beers we'd like to sample. We had just finished a free tour of the brewery. A chalkboard listed the beers on tap and the percentage of alcohol in each.

A bartender, Dwane, with long blond hair held back with a Dogfish bandana, brought us three-ounce samples, one at a time, in eco-cups made from corn. He stood a good beer bottle taller than his co-workers and looked as though he could have descended from Vikings. I wasn't courageous enough to admit to him that I didn't like beer (and that I was most excited about the 0 percent alcohol Beach Beer, Dogfish's version of birch beer). But he must have noticed that after I sipped each, Devon finished off my samples.

By this point, she had become quite chatty. "I'm the designated drinker," she told Dwane, by way of explanation. And then she challenged him to guess how long we'd known each other.

It's a good story: Four decades ago, our pregnant mothers met in maternity class, and we were born a week apart. But that's not what makes Devon a good friend. It's that she knows how I feel about beer and still didn't miss a beat when I invited her to join me for a last-minute Dogfish getaway. She was keen on a respite from her family, and I was ready to flee my writing deadlines. Plus, the new Dogfish Inn was calling.

Just a month before, I'd been camping at Cape Henlopen State Park on Delaware's coast with my guy and my beagle, and we wandered over to the historic town of Lewes (pronounced "Lewis"). I saw a sign for the Dogfish Inn, a new-looking, old-style motel building, and I went to investigate. I knew enough about the nearly 20-year-old brand to understand that the beloved craft brewery is a quirky company with wacky beers. Its motto is "Off-centered ales for off-centered people," and it's not unusual to find oysters in the stout or cilantro in the cider.

But I was drawn to the property by its whimsical design — such as "front desk" spelled out in magnet letters and a fire cauldron encircled by benches with life vests as cushions. In the common area, I found a lending library curated by City Lights bookstore in San Francisco. Turns out an old motel had been gutted and redesigned by a studio in Brooklyn, rooms complete with utility sinks, beer soap, pint glasses, beach chairs, Woolrich blankets and bottle openers on the walls. It opened this summer; I told the innkeeper I'd be back.

After Devon, Hammy the beagle and I arrived, we walked to lunch at Nectar — a cafe that grows herbs behind the bar and sells June Cleaver-y aprons on the wall. As we sat on couches by the fireplace, over an unbelievably thick grilled-cheese sandwich, we discussed our awful preteen haircuts. "Who let us do that?" Devon laughed. We realized that in all our years of friendship, this was our first adult trip together.

For dessert, we stopped at the town candy shop, and I bought draft beer jelly beans and chocolate seashells. Then we walked across the drawbridge over the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal and strolled toward the Cape May-Lewes Ferry terminal on the deserted beach. The wind blew fiercely: Seagulls flew in place, and sea foam blew off the waves, scuttling across the sand. Hammy sniffed horse-shoe crab skeletons and driftwood.



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

The homey, whimsically decorated Dogfish Inn, below, in Lewes, Del., holds chats every Saturday around the fire cauldron. If you're lucky, the founder of quirky brewery Dogfish Head, Sam Calagione, will host it and offer samples of new suds.



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Our guide said that the average alcohol content of beers across the country is 4.5 percent. "Here at Dogfish Head, it's about 9 percent," she said. "We like to party."

We decided to tour the brewery that afternoon, so the inn called ahead to reserve a spot for us — even though they don't take reservations — making us feel like Dogfish dignitaries. At the brewery, our tour guide told us stories about Dogfish founder Sam Calagione and the company's ascent from smallest commercial brewery in the country to the 20th largest. I learned that a dogfish is a shark, and Dogfish Head is a place in Maine.

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Sure enough, when it came time for samples in the no-frills tasting room and we met founder Sam, he stood behind the bar with a beer, jocular and looking like he'd just left a fraternity happy hour. He learned we were staying at the inn, high-fived us and brought samples of Pennsylvania Tuxedo — a new pale ale made with fresh spruce tips — which will be bottled next fall.

I took one sip and passed it to Devon. Then Dwane brought a sample of Olde School. "This is my favorite," he said. "Usually barley wine has a bite at the end, but because this is fermented with figs, it's a little sweet." That sounded promising to my sweet tooth. Sure enough, this 15 percent-alcohol sample was my favorite.

Back in our rooms, Devon fought the urge to crawl into bed, and I succumbed to the urge to eat jelly beans and seashells. After dinner in town, we examined the inn's 50-book collection of classics, such as Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" and Edith Wharton's "The Age of Innocence," and both found many we hadn't read.

"How about we bet a growler of Olde School on how many we can read in the next year," Devon said. She offered her hand. I laughed, nodded, and we shook. Then we went out to the blazing fire in

the courtyard, warmed our hands and toasted marshmallows on skewers.

The next morning, returning from a ride on the inn's three-speeds, we ran into Sam again — he lives a few blocks away and was headed out on his own bike. He invited us to return later for the inn's weekly fireside chat, which he hosts when he's in town.

We spent the day in Rehoboth, first lunching on the main drag at Dogfish Head Brewings and Eats, the sports-meets-surfer pub where I proclaimed to prefer food made with beer (our pizza, for example) over beer made with food. Then we followed our noses to the boardwalk, where we surrendered to childhood delights from Candy Kitchen and Thrasher's French Fries.

Before we knew it, we were back at the inn, sitting around the fire. For an hour, Sam entertained about two dozen of us — guests and a few Dogfish employees. Whenever folks joined, he'd call out, "Hello, new friends! I'm Sam from Dogfish! What are your names?" He poured beer samples, talked about new brews, quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson and answered questions from devotees about beer and company culture.

I looked into the fire and felt rested and happy. Thirty-six hours of winter beach time had nourished my soul; I had my reading list for 2015; and a 64-ounce growler of Beach Beer waited for me in the car. Plus, I'd come to Dogfishland not expecting to like any brews, yet I'd discovered two that were sweet enough for my palate. Okay, one has no alcohol and one is a barley wine, but I still think Sam would toast my good taste.

At one point toward the end of the gathering, he knocked a four-pack off the bench, and a bottle broke, beer puddling by the fire. "Ohhh! Party foul," he deadpanned to a laughing audience. "That's okay, we'll make more."

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If you go

WHERE TO STAY

Dogfish Inn

105 Savannah Rd., Lewes
302-644-8292

www.dogfishinn.com

Base camp for a Dogfish (or other) getaway, half a mile from the beach. Common area with complementary coffee, tea and lending library. Loaner bikes, pet-friendly. Winter rates \$149 weekdays, \$179 weekends. Winter weekday promotion: three nights for the price of two.

WHERE TO EAT

Dogfish Head Brewings & Eats

320 Rehoboth Ave., Rehoboth Beach
302-226-BREW (302-336-2739)

www.dogfish.com/eats

Beer is on tap and on the menu: fish and chips with 60 Minute IPA-battered codfish (\$16), salad with Midas Touch vinaigrette (\$6) and Alpine Idyll pizza with 60 Minute IPA-braised mushrooms (\$13). Live music most Friday and Saturday nights.

Nectar Cafe & Juice Bar

111 Neils Alley, Lewes
302-645-5842

www.cafenectar.com

Shabby-chic breakfast/lunch cafe and juice bar. Lean Green Machine juice includes apple, cuke, basil, spinach and jalapeno (\$5.75). Perfect for winter: grilled cheese and a cup of tomato soup, \$11.

Notting Hill Coffee

124 Second St., Lewes
302-645-0733

www.nottinghillcoffee.com

Local hangout, with coffee ground and roasted in-house. House-made, plate-sized sticky buns (\$3.75) are best heated. Lunch menu includes croissant sandwiches and wraps from \$5.75.

WHAT TO DO

Dogfish Head Craft Brewery

6 Cannery Village Center, Milton
www.dogfish.com

Free tours and tastings Monday through Saturday, year-round, no reservations needed. Brewery campus includes Bunyan's Lunchbox food truck with brats, chowder and hop-pickles; a gift shop; pint sales and growler fills; and oyster-shell bocce courts. Vintage & Vinyl happy hour with aged brews and record-player tunes on the first Thursday of each month.

Cape Henlopen State Park

Lewes
302-645-8983

www.destateparks.com/park/cape-henlopen

A short walk from Dogfish Inn, the 5,200-acre park sits at the convergence of the Atlantic Ocean and Delaware Bay. Enjoy miles of beach, nature trails, disc golf and World War II observation towers with 360-degree views. Newly completed Gordons Pond bike/hike path between the park and Rehoboth Beach. Borrow-a-bike program Wednesday-Sunday. Park is free for pedestrians/cyclists; \$8 per vehicle.

INFORMATION

www.dogfish.com
www.visitdelaware.com/beaches