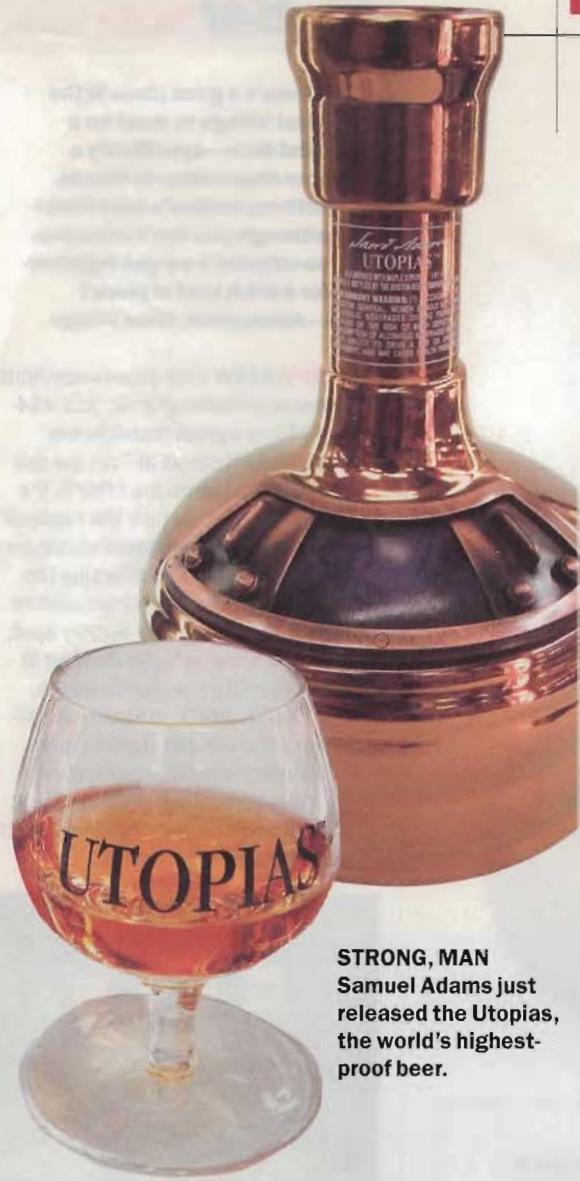


Boozeclues

Proof positive

By James Oliver Cury



STRONG, MAN
Samuel Adams just released the Utopias, the world's highest-proof beer.

A few weeks ago, Samuel Adams released the strongest beer in the world—a 50-proof (25% alcohol) concoction called **the Utopias** that is five times more potent than most beers. It looks like cognac, smells like sherry and is best consumed at room temperature in a snifter. There's no head and no carbonation, just loads of sweet-and-syrupy vanilla, caramel and dried fruit flavors. But this is no girly drink: It'll knock you on your ass in no time.

Frankly, I liked the concept more than the flavor. I'm a sucker for any beverage that wears its machismo on its sleeve—or in this case on its label. In the spirits world, any liquor that tops 100 proof or 50% alcohol by volume (ABV) is regarded as "overproof." My favorite is **Booker's** bourbon, a 125-proof, uncut, unfiltered whiskey that balances oak, smoke, vanilla and other flavors with just the right amount of heat.

Unlike snobby vodka drinkers looking for smoothness, I like a little tickle at the back of my throat, and the release of the Utopias reminded me that there must be other curiously strong spirits out there. For instance, Jamaicans adore a 134-proof white rum from **Wray & Nephew**; the Irish drink a whiskeylike **poteen** that can hit 180 proof; and the Russians and Poles have several vodkas that range from 110 proof to 190 proof.

Finding he-man hooch in New York City, however, is not so easy: Many bars don't stock overproof spirits because the stuff doesn't mix well in cocktails and it's widely perceived as catering to the lowest common denominator of drunks. Frat boys use **Bacardi 151** rum (yup, 151 proof) and the grain alcohol **Everclear** (151 and 190 proof) in wicked initiation rites, and it doesn't help that these spirits always come with a cautionary label: **WARNING: FLAMMABLE**.

Everclear is illegal in New York, but there is an alternative called **Devil's Springs**, a 160-proof vodka made in New Jersey. I picked up a bottle for \$15 at Warehouse Wines & Spirits (735 Broadway at Astor Pl, 212-982-7770). The label advises: **DO NOT DRINK AT FULL PROOF**. I did anyway, and found that it burned a flavorless hole in my mouth, throat and stomach. I may use it as a lighter fluid or to clean the pipes in my kitchen.

The 160-proof burn is far more palatable in **Stroh 80**, a rum made in Austria. I found a \$30 bottle at Soho Wine & Spirits (461 West Broadway between Houston and Prince Sts, 212-777-4332). The reddish spirit is sort of like the cheap-Chinese-takeout version of booze: overpoweringly sweet, lacking in subtlety, and scary in color. It is marketed, not surprisingly, as ideal in flambéed desserts.

Eventually, I made my way back to the whisky world: Several store owners recommended **George T. Stagg** bourbon—released in limited editions at 130 proof. LeNell Smothers, the owner of LeNell's (416 Van Brunt St between Coffey and Van Dyke Sts, Red Hook, Brooklyn, 718-360-0838) sells the bottles for \$75 (when they're in stock) and keeps a stash for people who want a taste.

Unfortunately, the Utopias costs more than all of these other bottles combined. Davidburke&donatella (133 E 61st St between Park and Lexington Aves, 212-813-2121) charges \$30 a glass; you can also buy a one-ounce pour for \$12 at the Hop Devil Grill (129 St Marks Pl at Ave A, 212-533-4467)—or shell out for the whole limited-edition, old-fashioned copper-kettlelike bottle at the Happy Deli (750 Eighth Ave at 46th St, 212-764-7605). If the alcohol content doesn't bowl you over, the price will: It's \$200.

PHOTOGRAPH: TALIA SHAI

Recently opened (too new to review)

into a classic American diner—serving big portions of smothered meatballs and gravy-covered fries. 157 E Houston St between Allen and Eldridge Sts (212-254-2080). Subway: F, V to Second Ave—Lower East Side. Breakfast, lunch, dinner. Average main course: \$10.

Luz
At this Brooklyn newcomer, chef Henry Lopez Jr. has taken cues from his mentors—his mother, Carmen, and chef Douglas Rodriguez. 177 Vanderbilt Ave between Myrtle and Wiloughby Aves, Clinton Hill, Brooklyn (718-246-4000). Subway: C to Clinton-Washington Aves. Dinner. Average main course: \$15.

Mainland

Upper West Side restaurateur Tsu Wang (Ollie's, Queso, 'Cesca, Haku) and chef partner Brian Young have opened this modern Chinese spot on the other side of the park. 1081 Third Ave at 64th St (212-888-6333). Subway: F to Lexington Ave—63rd St; 6 to 65th St—Hunter College. Lunch (Mon-Fri), dinner. Average main course: \$24.

Maremma

Cesare Casella, chef-owner of Beppe, pays tribute to Italy's Wild West with braised-oxtail Sloppy Giuseppe and an heirloom Tuscan bean bar. 228 W 10th St between Bleecker and Hudson Sts (212-

645-0200). Subway: 1 to Christopher St—Sheridan Sq. Lunch (Sat, Sun), dinner. Average main course: \$20.

Melba's

Melba Wilson, an original partner in Virgil's Real Barbecue, is putting her own spin on comfort food, like wine-laced short ribs and a signature phyllo "soul roll" packed with collards, black-eyed peas and yellow rice. 300 W 114th St at Frederick Douglass Blvd (Eighth Ave) (212-864-7777). Subway: B, C to 116th St. Brunch (Sat, Sun), dinner (closed Mon). Average main course: \$13.

NEW Night and Day

Part bar, part restaurant and part performance space, Night and Day serves

brunch, dinner and (soon) breakfast and late-night supper. A performance space for live jazz is in the works. 230 Fifth Ave at President St, Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-399-2161). Subway: M, R to Union St. Brunch (Sat, Sun), dinner. Average main course: \$14.

Perry St.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten downsized for his latest eatery, a 60-seat restaurant in one of Richard Meier's glass towers. Chef Gregory Brainin, formerly of Jean Georges, is at the stove, serving his cracker-crusted tuna, slow-roasted chicken and more. 176 Perry St at West St (212-352-1900). Subway: A, C, E to 14th St; L to Eighth Ave. Lunch, dinner. Average main course: \$25.