The beer I am drinking is transporting me back 40 years. I am a graduate student at the University of Toronto, in a blue funk due to some personal trauma and in sad desperation I have signed up for a graduate sociology student retreat. The retreat is at a stone chateau somewhere a few hours north of Toronto on the Laurentian Shield surrounded by boreal forest heavy with the scent of earth and musty forest floor detritus and pine. The crowd is about a third professors and the rest students – around a dozen people in all. As we finish eating dinner talk strays to hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, communicative competence and I flee outside, climbing a good distance up the large broad leafed tree standing in front of the chateau. I’m armed with a large bottle of Canadian Club I have brought along to cure snake bite and boredom. The chateau caretaker joins me in the tree explaining that I look more interesting than the people inside the chateau. He is Danish and in his 60s but in good shape. He actually built the chateau with his own hands 30 or 40 years previous and he spends the evening telling how he taught himself to be a stone mason and his theory of the universe as we finish off the Canadian Club. It took him three years to build the chateau and a mere few hours to explain the universe. As dawn approaches, we jog up the road to a sauna he had built on a dock in a small pond. We get blisteringly hot and then jump into the ice cold pond. I shoot out of the pond after some 30 seconds, my blue funk completely washed away, as the sun crawls blood red over the horizon.

Crooked Stave Hop Savant (6.7% abv), an American India Pale Ale brought me back to the stone chateau on the Laurentian Shield. It’s a beer I would like to share with the Danish stone mason just because it’s that good. Crooked Stave’s founder and brewmaster Chad Yablonski is Denver Colorado’s master of brewing barrel aged sours and American wild ales. His beers have the kind of individuality, independence, creativity and curiosity I found in the old Danish stone mason. Yablonski brewed Hop Savant with Brettanomyces, a yeast strain identified by Danish Chemist Hjelte Claussen in 1904 at the Carlsberg Brewery as a cause of spoilage in British ales. Brettanomyces can produce acetic acid, flavors often described as wet horse blanket or barnyard and can give the beer an incredible texture. Prying the cap off the bottle of Hop Savant releases a little bit of the forest. You get an immediate wave of citrus and fruit but behind it lurk herbal, earthy pine aromas seasoned with spice and wet horse blanket and a little musty forest floor funk. A hazy golden column fills the glass while producing a dense, persistent, clingy 2” foam collar with a very fine bead. Belgian wild and sour beers often achieve a balance by blending different aged beers and by adding fruit. Yablonski does this with the malt and especially the hop flavors for an exceptional result. He achieves a very well rounded palate with delicate lemony, funky
Brettanomyces flavors and textures balanced by rich light malt and the array of hop flavors (citrus, piney, tropical, melon) and an assertive bitterness. This is an exceptionally creamy beer with very finely bubbled carbonation achieving an exquisite sensual Brettanomyces texture. Drinking this beer makes me happy. I rate it 95. Beeradvocate.com members give it 91 while it gets a 99 at rate beer.com. Up until a few weeks ago you had to either drive to Colorado to get this beer or order it over the internet. It is now distributed in Minnesota.

Tafelbier – Dutch or Flemish for table beer – is what the Belgians drink during meals instead of Coke, Sprite, Tab or Fresca. The beer is light, yet flavorful, and so low in alcohol (1.5 to 2.5%) that the Lagere Gemengde School in Hasselt Belgium used to serve table beer to kids for lunch. A 2001 study identified soft drinks as a major cause of childhood obesity and the school found that the kids liked the beer better and it had fewer calories. Crooked Stave Beer Table Beer Table Beer, at 3.6% abv, is a little stronger than the stuff served at the Lagere Gemengde School. It is an American wild ale packed with flavor. Fruity, lemony peach aromas doused with tartness and traces of over ripe fruit rise from the glass. The hazy straw to gold beer supports a 2” pillowy white foam collar. It has a big tart, fruity, lemony palate that finishes bone dry. The wild yeast flavors nicely balance the big hops that show up on the finish. This is light, effervescent, very refreshing and goes very well with just about any meal. It is a good beer to drink when you want big flavor but do not want the alcohol of a bigger beer. I rate it 91 as do the members at Beeradvocate.com. It gets a 99 at Ratebeer.com.

The first thing I notice on opening Crooked Stave Colorado Wild Sage Mountain Saison (7.2% abv) is the strong aroma of Lakota ceremonial sage (aka prairie sage - Artemisia Ludoviciana) joined by two or three different layers of lemony citrus, light grains and some saison yeast. It’s a beautiful hazy straw colored beer and as it fills the glass produces a clingy 1” white foam collar that quickly descends to a thick film. The flavor profile suggests some form of sorcery has transformed a savory gourmet biscuit into a beverage: a light honey sweetness on a little biscuit seasoned with sage and then lemon grass and yeast driven lemon break through and pull
everything together. Its tart but the malts and spices mellow it so it is not as tart as it smells. The exceptionally creamy Wild Sage Mountain Saison drinks like a cloud with a medium to medium light body. Drink this beer for the subtle layers of flavor, the extraordinary texture and the amazing balance between the added spices, wild yeasts, saison yeasts and malts. I rate this 91, Beeradvocate.com gives it 87 while Ratebeer.com awards it a 95.

Boiling hops drives off their essential oils (aromas and flavors) and accentuates their bitterness. The carbon dioxide gas created during fermentation can also carry off essential oils. Yablonski has dry hopped his Crooked Stave Progenitor (6.2% abv) by tossing in a bunch of hops after the completion of fermentation. This provides floral and earthy aromas and flavors to balance the funky yeast and sour flavors. Progenitor is a sour golden ale that pours hazy gold under a frothy, clingy, finely bubbled 1” white foam collar. Funky yeast scents that border on tomato and some biscuit aromas join the hops. Yablonski balances this sourness with malt and hops that temper some of the lemony tartness. A mild tart fruit flavor suggestive of cherry is in the background. This is another of Yablonski’s creations providing an extraordinarily fine soft texture with a medium body and above average carbonation. I am particularly impressed by the use of hop and malt flavors to balance the wild yeast in this beer. I rate this 95, Beeradvocate.com gives it 92 and it gets 99 at Ratebeer.com.

I ordered my first Crooked Stave Surette Provision Saison, (6.2% abv) a year and a half ago from Blackwells and when it arrived I went out and bought a chunk of Beaufort Cheese, a French firm raw cow’s milk cheese that smells like a blend of bad feet and the rotting fruit of the Gingko tree or perhaps a cow pasture. To accompany that I had a chunk of Garroxta a Catalonian goat milk cheese smelling and tasting like damp earth with nutty and herbal notes. The beer’s big fruity, tart, winey nose, joined by a touch of wet horse blanket and barnyard with some light biscuit and lemon in the background, blended with the ripe cheese aromas had me thinking of July while a bone chilling January Alberta wind gnawed on Minnesota with its iron teeth. Surette Provision Saison pours hazy peach under a thin white cap that quickly
reduces to a thick film. The palate is tart all the way through with traces of lemon, fruit, light biscuit and funk. Very fine soft carbonation produces a medium to medium light body. The carbonation of the beer cuts through the fat of the cheese while the flavors meld well with both the buttery, meaty, funky flavors of the Beaufort and the earthy nutty flavors of the Garroxta. The aromas of all three are so funky farm like you can almost hear the cows. I rate Surette Provision Saison 95, the members at Beeradvocate.com rate it 93, it gets 95 from the Alström Brothers who founded the site, and gets 99 from Ratebeer.com.

With Crooked Stave Brewery & Taproom Vieille Artisanal Saison (4.2% abv), Yablonski has brewed a slightly lighter saison. It pours hazy straw under a thin but clingy white foam collar. It has a tart almost vinegary nose with lemon, spice, fruit and some light bread. On the tongue, it arrives lemony tart with fruit and citrus but not much hop presence. There are faint traces of salt and a slight mineral character. Vieille is refreshing, light, highly carbonated with a faint grainy astringency in the background. It has a slight wine like quality to it. I rate it 90, Beeradvocate.com rates it 89 and Ratebeer.com gives it 98.

Sour barrel aged beer and wild ales are love them or hate them beers and typically do not end up with the highest ratings. For every drinker the beer leads to satori, there is another pouring it down the drain. Crooked Stave has 110 beers listed on Ratebeer.com. 30 are unrated due to not enough ratings. One is rated 41, one is 61, there is a 76 and another is rated 88. The rest are 90 or above. 22 are rated 99 and one is 100. Chad Yablonski, master of funk, is the George Clinton of beer. Few brewers achieve these kinds of ratings. He founded Crooked Stave in 2010 and since its inception he has been making his wort at other breweries and then fermenting and aging at his Denver barrel aging cellar. Last November he set up a brewery and now does the whole process in house. Making beer with traditional beer yeasts, Brettanomyces, and various strains of bacteria is a lot of extra work and it ties up precious floor space in the brewery. The result costs more - $8 to $9 for a 500 ml bottle - but Yablonski achieves textures and layers and balances of flavor that more than justify the price. You will probably never slam down a six pack of these while watching a ball game but it’s a perfect beer for savoring during a long afternoon while watching the clouds slowly drift across the sky. I have seen all of the beer reviewed in this issue in town within the past week except for Beer Table.