

BUSINESS

For Vast Beer Selection, Head to Merchant's

Don't let the name Merchant's Fine Wine fool you. The longtime west Dearborn store is the place to go for beer, too.

By **Jeff Holmquist** January 24, 2011

For ages, people—especially young people—would go to Canada for beer selection that was better than what Detroit has. That was then. This is now. The script has been flipped.

Travel to Canada now requires an enhanced license or passport. Gasoline prices are very steep. And Michigan now has more fine beers than Canada does. This is due to the onward march of microbreweries, brewpubs and the influence of home brewers.

The store that is so emblematic of this is Dearborn's own **Merchant's Fine Wine**. (<http://www.merchantsfinewine.com>) A shop with one of those unrelenting "feel good" atmospheres, they are well-known for their wide array of alcoholic beverages, gourmet foods and gift ideas.

And Annette May finds you the beer.

For the last 4 1/2 years, Australian native May has been the resident beer manager at Merchant's. She'll counsel customers and assist with any and all beer questions and selections.

May is quite equipped to do that, too. Originally a bartender, she's studied at the renowned Siebel Institute Of Technology & World Brewing Academy in Chicago. She's had sensory evaluation classes and is a certified cicerone (pronounced siss-a-rono)—a beer professional who knows every style and all aspects of beer service and accompanying food combinations that are pertinent.

"People are sadly brainwashed," May says. "Ninety-five percent of the public thinks beer is supposed to taste like the big breweries—Budweiser, Coors, Miller. I try to educate them, build awareness and open up their minds and palates."

All this is said in her Australian accent, as she sings the virtues of "be-ah."

Change is blossoming, as the big brands aren't selling as much beer here. Merchant's has more than 1,050 different beers and includes major representation of Michigan's breweries. That's where the largest sales are coming from.

In 1985 Michigan had no more than three or four breweries. Now, it has 84.

May says that customers make Merchant's a "destination place"—the *one* place to find that *one* beer. They come from all over metro Detroit.

Take, for example, Brian Beaumont of Melvindale.

"I first came here with my uncle about 15 years ago," Beaumont says of Merchant's. "It's the *only* place where I can find the Two Hearted Ale IPA beer. You can also build your own six-pack, with six different beers."

"I have a lot of fun customers," May adds. "They say things like: 'I want that beer from Belgium,' or 'What's good today?' The answers? There are dozens of beers from Belgium, and what's good depends on what you like."

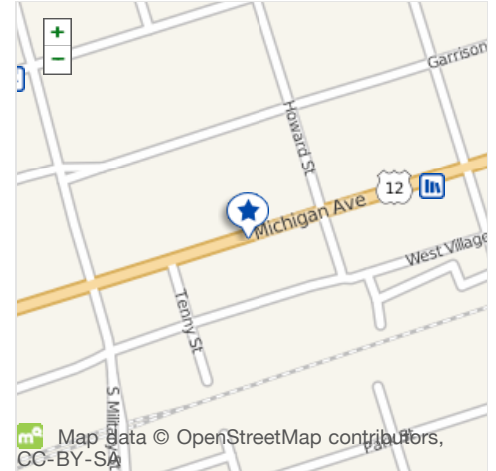
Still, May does her best to match customers to beer varieties. And there are plenty to choose from.

Of those 1,000-plus beers from all over the world, Merchant's has about a hundred different beer styles. The major categories include lagers, ales, bocks, stouts, ambers and wheat beers.

But really, there is a multitude of variation and coloration in beers. Do you like it sweet? Fruity? Bitter? Do you like hoppiness that lingers and tingles on the tongue? Do you enjoy the chewy feel of a roasted multi-grain dark beer? Are you up for a coffee cream stout or a vanilla



PHOTOS (7)



porter? Can you really resist an Arrogant Bastard Ale?

Beer is often referred to as mass-produced, home brewed, microbrewed, or as being "craft beer." The latter is the term that has gained currency and is the description of choice for May and her cohorts at Merchant's.

May declares: "All beer is good—as long as it's craft beer."

Annette leaves no stone unturned in her quest to educate others—and herself—about everything beer. She religiously reads publications such as Michigan Beer Guide, Great Lakes Brewing News and Beer Connoisseur.

Every June, her No. 1 vacation priority is the National Homebrewer's Conference, wherever it occurs in the U.S. She attends with husband Michael Bardallis, a successful home brewer.

May also appeared on Fox News last fall, talking about Michigan beer—though she herself has no TV. Demonstrably nonconformist, she pegs herself as "an organizational freak." A geek. A hat lady. Loves to cook, watches independent movies. And, of course, beer.

She's proud of Merchant's, too. "If I didn't work here, I'd still shop here," she said. "It's a great store."

And though the store has been around for almost 20 years, new customers still come in looking for specialty foods, wine and beer. Like Dearborn resident Andrew Bochenek, who just had his very first trip to Merchant's.

"There's a vast variety of beers, laid out nicely," he said. "I like Michigan beers and want to support them—not the large breweries like Miller, Bud, or the others."

Thirty minutes later, he's "still stunned" by the sheer array of quality beers. Time for May to step in.

What do you shop for at Merchant's? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

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