

ON THE PISCO TRAIL DESTINATION NASHVILLE GRAPE COCKTAILS WOOD-ROASTED COFFEE

imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE

The
UNITED
STATES
of
BEER



Your State-by-State
Guide to American
Craft Beer

Find out why we love
this Indiana wheat ale
on page 42!



quench Local jasmine rice makes Beer Lao a quaff not soon forgotten.

The Flavor of Laos

The Meimei Café is the kind of backpacker restaurant that can be found all over Asia. The chairs sport pillows made from colorful local textiles; the clientele is equal parts tie-dyed European travelers and young, trendy locals; and the menu offers poorly prepared, inauthentic versions of both Chinese and Western specialties. I ended up there because it was late and I was hungry. I had spent all day on a crowded bus traveling to Xishuangbanna, a jungle-filled wedge of China that sits just above the Golden Triangle, where the borders of Laos, Burma and Thailand meet, and by the time I'd found a room at a hostel, the local restaurants had all closed their doors.

I was about to order a bottle of Chinese beer, when I noticed Meimei's menu listed something called Beer Lao. Being less than 100 miles from Laos, I ordered it, and the waitress brought me a dark bottle with a tiger's head emblazoned on its side. The lager was a deep coffee brown and had a rich, malty flavor balanced with just enough hoppy bitterness. It wasn't nearly as strong as an American IPA or as complex as a craft brew, but it had flavor, and in China, that flavor was something of a minor miracle.

I had been living in China for nearly six months and traveling there for more than a decade, and I'd learned that no matter where I went, there was one constant I could count on: weak beer. In every restaurant from Beijing to Chengdu, the main beverage offered at lunch and dinner, other than tea, was one of the country's watery pilsners or lagers. These beers were, in some ways, perfect for the food they accompanied. With their low alcohol content, they were great for washing down meals of oily stir-fries or spicy hot pots. And over the years their flavor had come to define the country for me—when I was back home in the U.S., a bottle of Tsingdao could transport me right back to a canteen in Beijing or a farmhouse near Guilin.

But it would not be an exaggeration to say that discovering Beer Lao changed my life. As soon as I

got back to where I was living, in the city of Kunming, I found a specialty store in the backpacker quarter that carried not just the dark lager but also Beer Lao's lighter lager, which had a golden hue, a Champagne-like carbonation, and hints of grapefruit in the flavor. Both quickly became staples in my fridge.

Like the big Chinese and Vietnamese beer companies, I discovered, Beer Lao was founded by a European, in conjunction with a local businessman, to meet the needs of the French expatriates living there. But in the 1990s, a Soviet-trained Lao brewer, Sivilay Lasachack, took over production. She replaced some of the imported grains the company was using with local Jasmine rice, which gave the beer a crisper feel and a somewhat flowery aroma, and she changed the flavor profile to attract more

local Lao consumers. Somehow that flavor was richer and more interesting than anything brewed nearby.

I've since moved back to the U.S., but I still keep an eye out for Beer Lao. Of course, it's no longer the most interesting beer available to me, but I've grown attached to it nonetheless. It's not easy to find, but occasionally I'll see it on the menu at a Thai or Vietnamese restaurant, and when I do, I always order a bottle. One sip takes me right back to my own little far-flung corner of China. **By Georgia Freedman**

