

'YEAR IN BEER' DUO DRINKS UP ALASKA

By MERIDETH CANHAM-NELSON
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Residents of Alaska all tell a similar story of how they came to live in this rugged state.

The reasons might be different — "I had a job transfer," "I came on vacation" — but the result is the same: They fell in love with the land and the people, and never left.

I, too, fell in love with Alaska before my plane even landed. The snow-capped mountains and ice-filled bay was a stunning sight. I felt an overwhelming sense of calm and belonging, even though my feet had not yet touched the ground. That's a funny thing for a girl born and raised in Carmel to feel about such a cold place.

Some people thought going to Alaska in January was crazy. But my husband Chris and I traveled to Anchorage for the Great Alaska Beer and Barleywine Festival held Jan. 18-19. Sponsored by the Great Northern Brewing Club, this two-day festival is a celebration of all beers big and hearty. The breweries serve barley wines and beers, such as imperial stouts, double India pale ales and strong ales, which are all known for their generous alcohol content and intense flavors.

Being the first destination of our "Year in Beer," the five-day trip was all about, well, beer. We attended the local brewing club's monthly meeting, visited a few new breweries and, of course, attended the festival.

The Alaskan brewing community seems to embody the attitude of Alaskan residents as a whole. And our first experience of this spirit was on our first night in Anchorage. We took part in commemorating the life of Jeff Bission with an imperial stout brewed in his honor.

Last year, Alaskan beer writer Jim Roberts was on his way to the festival when he received a call from his daughter. His son-in-law Jeff had been killed in Iraq. Jim's daughter encouraged him to still attend the festival because Jeff would have wanted it that way.

The commemorative stout was the idea of Lisa Urban, a member of the Great Northern Brewing Club, the group that sponsors the festival. The unveiling of the commemorative stout was also a fundraiser for a memorial to the 53 members of the local 425th regiment who have died in Iraq.

Urban's efforts reflect the spirit of Alaska. Local or not, one feels a sense of camaraderie and belonging in Alaska. Alaskans are embracing and eager to help others. A transplant himself, Roberts says: "I am intensely proud of my beer community and my state."

Our focus was on the beer, but it was the people that made it an experience. My husband Chris and I have no plan to move from sunny Carmel Valley to snowy Alaska any time soon, but we will definitely be going back.

For more information on the Year in Beer and the travels of Merideth Canham-Nelson and her husband Chris Nelson visit their travel Web site www.thebeergeek.com.

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