

Choosing a Belgian Yeast For Your Homebrew

Reprint of 2006 article by **Elvis (a great brewer and owner of the previous brew shop-Brew Ha Ha on Magazine street)**

Brewing Belgian ales is perfect for hot New Orleans summers as these yeast can produce good fermentation profiles even at 80 degrees and higher (I personally don't like the flavor of most Belgian yeasts when fermented at normal temps [65-75 F]).

Why does this work with Belgian yeasts and not normal brewing yeasts? It is because they are almost a different species of yeasts, which may have evolved from yeasts used to ferment wine, as Chris White of White Labs says, "Belgian yeasts have a lot in common with wine yeasts. They have phenolic compounds that are similar to wine yeasts". It is not a huge leap to imagine beer brewers hundreds of years ago, not having any yeast to brew with, and using yeast from a local winery. I personally have experimented brewing beer with wine yeast with amazingly acceptable results.

There are dozens of yeast strains out there with very different flavor profiles. I have brewed with all these strains and have narrowed down some of my favorites and least favorite strains:

Favorite #1: White Labs WLP550 Belgian Ale yeast/ Wyeast 3522: this strain originated from La Chouffe and, to me, has the best overall flavor and aroma profile of all the strains. Spicy and phenolic with a strong ferment at 78-88 F.

Favorite #2: White Labs WLP570/ Wyeast 1388 Belgian Golden Ale: this would be my first choice for Golden ales and triples (the yeast originates from Duvel), I often start with a white beer, then do a golden ale (1.065) and then repitch again for a tripel (1.085). This yeast will eat up all the sugar and leave these beers dry and crisp with a citrusy, spicy aroma which is great with a hint of coriander. Ferment at 75-85 F.

Favorite #3: White Labs WLP 565 Saison: when you ferment with this yeast you need to throw everything you know about fermenting out the window because this is a crazy yeast. First of all it is slow and likes it HOT, I tried pushing the envelope on this yeast but even at 95 F. it still made tasty beer (even being bottle conditioned at 105F.). The flavor is VERY dry (sometimes you get close to 100% attenuation) and you need to pay close attention to finishing gravities, do not try to bottle until the FG is below 1.007 or lower. The final flavor profile is spicy (even with no spices added to the brew people will pick up spice notes) and lightly fruity and very crisp and refreshing. It can be temperamental during the first pitching but once it gets going it can be repitched several times with no problems. Ferment at 85-100 F. (same with bottle conditioning).

Favorite #4: bottle cultured Hitachino Nest white beer yeast: this yeast cultured up easily out of a bottle bought locally and it has a clean spicy character with a distinct lactic tartness in the aroma and flavor. I haven't tried repitching this yet, it may end up getting more tart each time but I think this is the best yeast out there for white beers and Flanders Red and brown ales.

Least Favorite #1: White Labs WLP 530/ Wyeast 3787 Trappist Ale yeast: although this is supposedly the same yeast used to be Westvletteren and Westmalle it has never made a good beer for me. The results are fruity and muddy without any of the yeast character that makes those beers so great. I have tried fermenting them hot and cool and they always taste like a funky homebrew. I recommend experimenting with culturing some out of a bottle or using a different strain.

Least Favorite #2: White Labs WLP 500/ Wyeast 1214 Chimay Strain: The best Chimay clone I ever made was using the yeast from a fresh bottle of the red label, the character of these commercial strains do not taste anything like Chimay in my opinion, I'm not sure why but if you want to copy Chimay then you need to bring some yeast back to life from a bottle (I don't know why but I have had less and less success with culturing Chimay yeast over the years, the trick is to get some fresh bottles [printed on the cork] that were shipped in the cool months).

I hope this encourages you to keep brewing through these hot months by brewing a crisp golden ale or Saison and not freaking out that the thermometer is showing 92 F.. Also remember that warm bottle conditioning is essential and to chill the beer down after it is carbonated for a week or two before drinking it, this does wonders for mellowing any rough edges.

Brew on!!!!!!

-Elvis