

Getting Down In The Low Countries

By Hank Bienert (August 2003)

In my constant quest to serve the members of CCH, my wife and I volunteered to tour Belgium and the Netherlands this spring to research the beer, the food, the beer, and the culture...and the beer. We are still waiting to be reimbursed by the CCH educational fund.

Brussels is a modern city with an old center based around the Grand Square, a large plaza ringed by the ornate halls of such guilds as the wheelbarrow makers, and the hop growers. Remember, a liquid that was boiled and then contained alcohol was a lot safer to drink than water in a pre-chlorine era. So beer was THE drink in the old days and brewing was a respected trade.

Belgium is a fantasy land for odd tastes from Lambics (from Lambeek) up through the high alcohol barleywines. Draft beer is unusual and all bars serve multiple brands with some bottles shops having 300 different offerings, 95% ales. Tradition is that each particular beer should be served in its own specifically shaped glass.

Brussels has lots of chocolate shops and most restaurants offer mussels plus fries. They have as many ways of cooking mussels as we Cajuns have of fixing mudbugs. The Belgians are very proud of their pomme frites. Well, we tried fries all over and, if one takes any FRESH fry, including McD, and dips them in mayo or Creole mustard or flavored catsup (try adding a little chili powder to it), it will taste as good as a Belgian one. Belgian waffles, however do have extra sweet dough and I believe are superior to our local ones.

Okay, let's talk about beer. Jupiler and Stella Artois are popular lagers with little special about them. Mort Subite (sudden death), Hoegarden, Duvel, Orval and some of the Abbey beers tasted as they do in N.O. so the trip across the pond must be an easy one. Delirium Tremens (9%abv) was allright as were the 8% Rochefort Trappist (remember a Trappist is under the direction of the monks while an Abbey is the licensing of the name only). Most memorable were:

1) Westvleteren - the Saint Sixtus Abbey is the smallest of the 6 Trappist breweries in the world and the product is sold only at the Abbey on only certain days of the year with 12 bottles per person limit. (Limited supply on limited days is a successful marketing approach most females are aware of!) The bottles have no labels being distinguished by the cap color alone. Gold cap, the 11.5% abv Abbot Special is the rarest of the three beers. Very tasty!! Rich flavors, high alcohol yet smooth.

Norman Crassons who was kind enough to watch my dog, was gifted one of these - ask him about it. I found it at the Bier temple in Brussels, a specialty shop which claims to stock the world's largest beer variety - in excess of 500!

2) Bush by Dubuisson (12%) - multiple flavors - raisin, toffee.

3) Straffe Hendrick (strong Henry) is on tap in the Half Moon brewpub in Brugge, a town worth a side trip of a couple of days. It's a Belgian Wit with coriander but no orange peel. Refreshing on a warm day (by now the temperature had risen in three days from low thirties with flurries to near 80) - I'm planning to make some soon.

4) Saison by Silly was a fruity, brown ale, very satisfying. Here's what Michael Jackson, the beer guru says about it.

"A Saison beer is a blend of beer. Silly is one of the few Saison brewers that still stores a first batch of the top fermenting beer for about a year, and then blends the old beer with a fresh brewed batch. From this batch part is again stored away for a year. Indeed, brewing Saison is a seasonal artwork performed only once a year. The resulting beer is a balancing act, only mastered by the brewer who tries to get every year the same color, aroma and taste in his Saison. He, Mr. Van der Haegen himself, balances sweetness, bitterness and sourness (from the old beer) into a fabulous copper brown colored beer of about 5.2% alcohol by volume. The Saison has a good aging capability: several years when stored properly. Saison should be served rather cold."

Ghent is a lovely city, worth a day trip out of Brussels which is not that remarkable a place. On to Amsterdam. This city of canals is at the first dam of the Amstel river-hence the name.

Very open compared to Brussels - I believe "don't ask, don't tell" was invented here. After more than 80 years, the Dutch Protestants were able to throw out the Catholic troops who had so brutally suppressed them. (More than 10,000 executions in a few weeks is brutal in my book). Open Catholic worship was not permitted.

Nevertheless the Protestant rulers asked no questions of the thousands of known Catholics who would go into a large building every Sunday morning for an hour.

So you pass a place named perhaps Happy Times Coffee Shop which is usually painted in Jamaican colors with a sign that says "Don't smoke joints outside, must be 18 and non-hostile to enter." Nobody asks what you do inside, but the aroma is definitely NOT that of fries.

A number of apartments have large picture windows and young women sit in each window under a lamp which is usually red, reading or doing needlepoint but never beckoning or shaking anything. They will be in sensible underwear, like a Sears ad in the Sunday paper. Sometimes the curtains are shut. Nobody asks what's going on inside.

But, when a street person with an overflowing cardboard box stretched out on a park bench we saw how quickly the cops appeared to hustle him off. No one is walking around with a drink in their hand. It is a law abiding city; they just have different, perhaps better laws than we do.

Enough about social mores-it is a lovely city whose multiple canals are much cleaner than those in Venice or Metairie and all types of food are available...and the beer is very ordinary. Heinekin on tap a few blocks from the brewery was a little tastier than that from the familiar green bottle (which incidentally tasted the same as it does here). It's amazing and sad that the Netherlands has developed no beer variety considering it's neighbored by Belgium and Germany. Lagers are everywhere and after trying about a dozen different, we sadly concluded that Heinekin might be the best they've got!

Prices in Brussels, Ghent, Brugge and Amsterdam were a bit higher than here except for the beer. Most cost about a 90 cents/bottle in the store except for the Abbey (a buck and a

quarter) and the Trappist (2-5 bucks/bottle).

Hank
