

Belgian Beer Culture

**WITH A LIST OF
BEER TOUR OPERATORS**



Flanders
State of
the Art

VISITFLANDERS



A BRIEF HISTORY OF BELGIAN BEER

The art of brewing beer is as old as civilisation and originated in Mesopotamia in 9000 BC. Over time, beer found its way to Gaul via Egypt and the Roman Empire. Initially, beer brewing was a household task and the first brewers were women.

In the Middle Ages, abbeys became knowledge centres for agriculture, livestock and certain crafts, including brewing beer. The monks were allowed to drink limited amounts of their regional beverage because the quality of the drinking water was so unsanitary. In southern Europe, the daily drink was wine, which is why the monks there concentrated on growing grapes and winemaking. The climate of our region was not suited

for winemaking, which is why the locals turned to beer brewing instead. Thanks to the monks, beer brewing evolved from a domestic activity into a true, artisanal craft.

In the Middle Ages, beers were flavoured for the first time with a herbal mixture called "gruit". Brewers had to purchase this mixture in the "gruithuis" (see the Gruuthuuse in Bruges). The abbeys were exempt from this obligation. Nevertheless, they switched to hops because it helped preserve the beer, giving it a longer shelf life. In the eleventh century, the Benedictine Abbey of Affligem played an important role in the introduction of hops-growing in Flanders.

In 1364, Emperor Charles IV enacted the "Novus Modus Fermentandi Cerevisiam" decree. He sought to improve the quality of beer with his "new method for brewing beer" and required that brewers use hops. The obligation applied throughout the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation to which Brabant and Imperial Flanders (Rijks-Vlaanderen), the region to the east of the Scheldt, belonged. In the Flanders, the region to the west of the Scheldt, the right to dispense gruit was maintained. As a result of this division, Belgian beer culture diversified. The brewers in Imperial Flanders and Brabant brewed hopped beers, which kept for longer. The gruit beers held their own in Flanders and brewers



acidified their beer to help preserve the beer, leading to the development of red-brown beers.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, more and more regulations were drawn up to ensure that good beers were brewed. In Germany, the "Reinheitsgebot" (1516) stated that beer could be brewed exclusively from barley, hops and water. In Halle, in Flemish Brabant, a city account from 1559 refers to the mash for brewing "lambiek" beer. From the seventeenth century onwards, regional beers were created such as the Antwerp "gerstenbier" (barley beer), "Leuvense witte" (Leuven white beer), brown beers in Diest and Oudenaarde, and "caves" (cellared beers) in Lier. Gradually, brewers started to "export" their beers outside of their own region.

The end of the eighteenth century marked the end of the abbey's privileges. In 1783, the Emperor Joseph II dissolved the abbey's because they infringed upon the breweries. Several abbey's and their breweries were destroyed during the French Revolution.

The nineteenth century marked a new chapter in beer history with the breakthrough of the Czech pilsner (1839). This beer was an instant success in the world of cloudy, dark (regional) beers. During the Industrial Revolution, scientists gained a better insight into the brewing process and yeast culture in general.

The First World War was the final blow for several Belgian breweries. The German occupying forces seized the copper vats, equipment and their vehicles. Only half of the nearly 3,200 breweries survived the First World War. The breweries, which slowly picked up where they left off, were dealt a new, heavy blow during the economic crisis of the 1930s and by the Second World War. There were only 775 breweries left in 1946.

In the following decades, more and more microbreweries closed as a result of the competition and the high investment cost for new installations. The big breweries consolidated their home market through acquisitions.

Inspired by the Flower Power movement of the late 1960s, Belgian specialty beers were rediscovered. In 1977, the British beer guru Michael Jackson (1942-2007) finally put Belgian beer culture in the spotlight, leading to the global recognition of the Belgian beer culture in the following decades.

Between 1985 and 2000, large and medium-sized breweries began to merge. At the same time, local microbreweries opened, which largely brewed beer for export, in some cases at the request of foreign importers who were looking for unique Belgian beers.

The interest in authentic speciality beers has continued to grow since the turn of the century. The Belgian beer industry includes some of the best known and popular brands, which are supported by intensive marketing and publicity campaigns, as well as Trappist beers - which are becoming increasingly exclusive because of the limited quantities that monasteries can produce - and the distinctive specialty beers of local and family-owned breweries. The trend was first observed for lambic beers, but is now spreading to include Flemish red-brown beers, brown beers, and strong blonde, well-hopped beer.

In recent years, hobby brewers are increasingly starting to share their beers with the public, selling them directly to customers or to local restaurants and pubs.

Belgian beer styles



Bottom fermentation beers

PILS (4,5 to 5,5 vol.%) is a golden, clear beer with a softly bitter taste (e.g. Stella Artois, Primus, Romy, Bavik, Vedett, etc.), often used as thirst quencher.

Top-fermenting beers

TRAPPIST (www.trappist.be) is the name of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, also known as the Trappist Order. The name does not infer anything about the beer type. There are six Trappist breweries in Belgium: Westmalle, Westvleteren, Achel, Chimay, Orval and Rochefort, and their beers are easy to recognize thanks to the hexagonal logo of an Authentic Trappist Product, which means that the beer was brewed within or in the close vicinity of the walls of a Trappist monastery (by the monks or under their supervision). The brewery must be of secondary importance within the monastery. There should be no intention to make profit: the main goal is to cover the expenses of the monks, and what remains should be donated to charity.

This association has a legal standing, and its logo gives the consumer some information and guarantees about the product.

ABBEY BEER is a collective denominator (so not a specific beer type) for beers where the brand name refers to an existing or dissolved Norbertine or Benedictine abbey, such as Grimbergen, Affligem, Tongerlo, Sint-Bernardus, Bornem and others. These breweries and religious orders have created an authenticity logo, which reads Erkend Belgisch Abdijbier (Recognised Belgian Abbey Beer, see www.belgianbrewers.be). In order to use the logo, there has to be a demonstrable, historical connection with an abbey site; the brewery has to pay royalties to the abbey and

the abbey may also check the marketing strategy and publicity material.

WHITE BEER OR WHEAT BEER is usually an unfiltered, cloudy beer of which the mash contains 30 to 50% of wheat. Usually coriander and orange peel are added for a crisp, refreshing taste (e.g. Hoegaarden, Vedett White, Mater Witbier, etc.). This old beer type was rediscovered and brewed again in 1966 by Pierre Celis.

BLONDE BEERS (5,5 – 7,5 vol.%) usually have a moderate alcohol content and are slightly malty to slightly sweet with a bitter aftertaste (e.g. Mane-blusser, Smiske Nature-Ale, Augustijn Blond, etc.). They are brewed with pale malts to obtain a lightly coloured beer.

STRONG BLONDE BEERS (7 - 11 vol.%) are different from triple beers because of their rich head and slightly bitter taste (e.g. Duvel, Hapkin, Omer, Gentse Strop, etc.).

TRIPEL (7 – 9 vol.%) is often, but not always, a relatively strong, golden beer with a malty to slightly sweet taste, sometimes with spices (e.g. Tripel Karmeliet, Brugse Tripel, etc.).

AMBER BEERS are brewed with a mixture of pale and amber malts.

BROWN OR DARK BEERS (6 - 7 vol.%), refers to darker, slightly sweet beers with a flavour of liquorice, candy, raisin and sometimes a slightly burnt finish (e.g. Witkap Pater, Pater Lieven Bruin, etc.). They are brewed with a mixture of pale, amber and dark malts.

DUBBEL (DOUBLE) is often, but not always, a relatively strong dark beer. This name is often used when referring to abbey or trappist beers.

STRONG DARK BEERS (8 – 13 vol.%) are a group of dark beers with a high alcohol content. Usually these beers have a sweet to slightly burnt flavour (e.g. Gouden Carolus Classic, Kasteelbier Bruin, etc.).

STOUT originates from the U.K. or Ireland and is typically a dark beer with a slightly burnt/roasted flavour. A stout can be sweet (milk stout, e.g. Pony Stout) or bitter (e.g. Troubadour Imperial Stout, Hercule). Originally “stout” was the strongest beer of the brewery and could therefore be either blonde or dark.

SCOTCH is a beer style related to stout, characterized by a touch of caramel.

BARLEY WINE is a strong, alcoholic variety of blonde or dark beer.

SAISON originates from the province of Hainaut and is typically pale to amber in colour, with a relatively low ABV (5 – 6,5 vol.%) and usually thirst quenching and quite hoppy or spicy. However, saison is not an

official beer style and can differ from these characteristics. Originally saison was a farmhouse ale brewed in the winter months in the French-speaking part of Belgium to be drunk by the farm workers in summer.

INDIA PALE Ale (IPA) originates from the British ‘stock bitter’ which was more intensely hopped to ensure a longer preservation. When its popularity in the Indian colonies increased, this beer type also became known as India Pale Ale.

SPÉCIALE BELGE (4,8 – 5,5 vol.%) is an authentic, Belgian beer style that was created in 1905 as a response to the German pilsner beers and English imported beers that were so successful at the time. Spéciale belge are amber-colored beers with a distinctive, malty flavour (e.g. a bolleke De Koninck, Palm, Special De Ryck, Tonneke, etc.).

BIÈRE BRUT (11 - 11.5 vol.%) is a strong beer that is aged like a champagne. The 75-cl bottles are regularly rotated a quarter turn and slightly tilted until all the yeast collects in the neck of the bottle. The yeast is then frozen and removed, and the bottle is topped up again. The result is a very sparkling beer (e.g. Deus, Malheur Brut, etc.), blonde or dark.

FRUIT BEER (2,5 – 6 vol.%) are beers flavoured with fruit, fruit juice or fruit extract. Traditionally sour cherries are steeped in young beer for a few months. Fruit beers can be sweet (e.g. Mystic Lemon, Wittekerke Rosé, Liefmans Cuvée Brut, etc.), or sour when based on lambic beer (see “Oude Kriek”).

Spontaneous fermentation beers

LAMBIK / LAMBIC is a flat, sour wheat beer which fermented with airborne yeast and aged on wooden barrels. Traditionally, young and old lambic are blended with each other and then re-fermented in the bottle to obtain a sparkling geuze beer.

OUDE GEUZE (5 - 7 vol.%) is a blend of spontaneously fermented lambic beers of different ages, the oldest being at least 3 years old and the average at least 1 year old, and refermented in the bottle. Only this type of beer can be called “oude geuze”, this being protected as “guaranteed traditional specialty” on a European level.

GEUZE is usually a more commercial variant, either not consisting of a blend of 1, 2 and 3 year old lambic, or being a blend of spontaneously fermented beer with a top-fermented beer. The adjective “oud” or “oude” may not be used in this case.

Beers of mixed fermentation

VERSNIJBIER (6 - 8 vol.%), or blended beer, is brewed by blending old and young beer or mixing beers of spontaneous fermentation with high and low fermentation beers (e.g. Petrus Aged Pale, Cuvée Watou, Vicardin Tripel Geuze, etc.). The most traditional type of this blended beer is the so-called “oud bruin”.

VLAAMS BRUIN / FLEMISH BROWN (4,5 – 8 vol.%) is associated with the region around Oudenaarde. These are beers with a deliberate lactic acid infection and often slightly sweetish. They are obtained by mixing young beer and “old” beer aged on metal tanks or wooden barrels.

FARO is a sweetened low-alcohol beer made from a blend of lambic and a much lighter, freshly brewed beer to which brown sugar (or sometimes caramel or molasses) was added. The use of the lighter beer (or even water) and of substandard lambic in the blend made this a cheap, light, sweet beer for everyday use. The sugar was originally added shortly before serving, and therefore did not add carbonation or alcohol to the beverage and gave it a sweet taste.

OUDE KRIEK is the most traditional fruit beer and is brewed using 100% lambic as a base. Cherries are macerated in lambic to obtain this beer (e.g. Mort Subite, Boon, Lindemans, Timmermans, De Troch, Cantillon, Drie Fonteinen, De Cam, etc.). The name is protected by on a European level, like Oude Geuze.

FLEMISH RED-BROWN BEER (5 - 6,5 vol.%) is brewed with reddish barley malts and is associated with southern West Flanders. They are obtained by mixing young beer and “old” beer aged on wooden barrels. The beers tend to be spicy instead of bitter and have a distinctive, crisp, slightly citrusy note (e.g. Rodenbach, Duchesse de Bourgogne, Vander Ghinste Oud Bruin, etc.).

‘OUD BRUIN’ / FLEMISH SOUR ALE is collective noun for Flemish Brown and Flemish red-brown beers.

WHAT MAKES BELGIAN BEERS SO UNIQUE?



1 THE QUALITY AND THE GROUND-BREAKING CRAFTSMANSHIP

These ensure that Belgian brewers regularly win awards in international competitions. For example, the renowned American website, www.ratebeer.com, recently honoured Westvleteren with the title of world's best beer for the second year in a row. But other beers also regularly win prizes.

2

The great variety of the brewing processes, the ingredients and the taste profiles.

3

The tradition that has been handed down over the centuries from generation to generation. A good example of this is the Belgian Family Brewers label of origin (www.belgianfamilybrewers.be). The members of this association have all been brewing beer in Belgium uninterruptedly for at least fifty years. The beers that bear this logo have to be unique and may not be sold under another brand name. These beers represent a combined total of over 1,500 years of experience in beer brewing.



4



Beer such as Trappist beers, abbey beers, lambic beers (geuze, faro, kriel), reddish-brown beers, "speciale belge", "bière brut", and wood-aged, fruit beers are a unique Belgian speciality. These beers are seducing increasingly more Belgian and international beer lovers alike. They are also increasingly imitated abroad, although the authentic Belgian beers are widely considered to be the beer reference par excellence.

5

The wide spectrum of passionate beer brewers,

including global and national breweries, as well as small (family-owned) breweries, and several passionate home brewers.



6

The inclusion of Belgian beer culture in the Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.



7



The pioneering role that AB InBev played in putting Belgian beer on the world map.

9



The centuries-old Flemish tradition of beer-based dishes.

Compared with other countries, Belgian cuisine has a lot of dishes that use beer as an ingredient, and beer is often presented as the best pairing option for gourmet meals. New initiatives, which have met with a positive reception, focus on the combination of beer and cheese or beer and chocolate. "Bapas", or small appetizers inspired by the Spanish tapas, have been created, which pair well with specialty beers. In some cases, beer was even used as an ingredient.

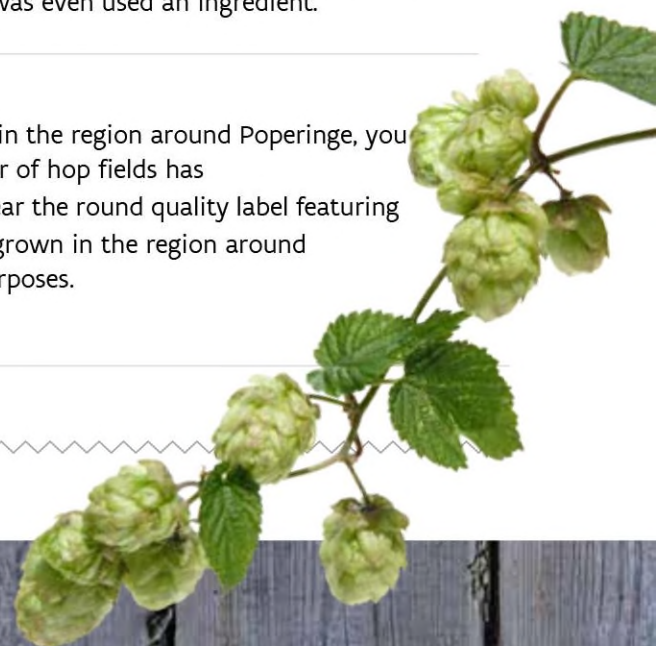
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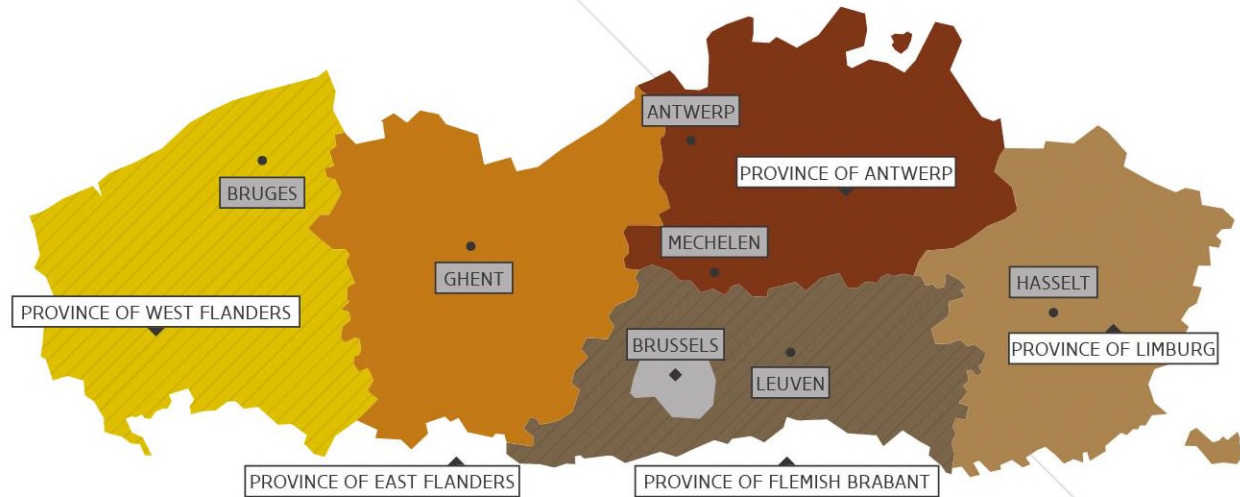
The fact that every beer has its own glass. Nowhere in the world will you find such a variety of branded glasses.

10

In West Flanders, more specifically in the Westhoek region and in the region around Poperinge, you will still find several hop gardens. In recent decades, the number of hop fields has dwindled to about 160 hectares. Beers that use Belgian hops bear the round quality label featuring a stylised hop cone (www.belgischehop.be). A small quantity of hops is still grown in the region around Asse and Aalst, albeit for hop shoots (a Belgian delicacy) and decorative purposes.



BEER AND FLANDERS AS A DESTINATION



Leuven and the Province of Flemish Brabant

Leuven is Belgium's beer capital. AB InBev still brews its well-known Stella Artois beer here, while Domus creates artisanal beers in its brewery in the shadow of City Hall. And the city can be explored year-round thanks to several unique packages. Leuven also organizes the Leuven Beer Weekend with as top activity the Zythos Beer Festival, the biggest beer-tasting festival in the world about Belgian beer. Flemish Brabant has about 30, often artisanal, breweries. Besides AB InBev, with branches in Leuven and Hoegaarden, the Haacht Brewery, Palm Brewery and Affligem Brewery have also become prominent. The Pajottenland region, to the south west of Brussels, is the birthplace of the unique lambic beers, found only in Belgium. There is a great atmosphere in the region's authentic pubs and B&Bs and hotels often offer beer packages.



Brussels

Belgium's rich beer heritage is celebrated in countless cafés in Brussels, which serve a host of beers including kriel and geuze, the typical regional beers of Brussels and the surrounding region. What could be better than enjoying a beer on a terrace or in the cosy setting of one of the authentic brasseries in Brussels? The city still has two traditional breweries which are considered to be among the world's best: the Zenne Brewery and Cantillon, which is part of the Brussels Geuze Museum. A highlight for every beer lover is the beer weekend, held each year in the unique setting of the Grote Markt, site of the Belgian Brewers Guild Hall. Dozens of well-known and lesser known breweries take part, giving visitors the opportunity to discover their beers.



Antwerp, Mechelen and the Province of Antwerp

The Province of Antwerp has a great deal to offer beer lovers. There are currently 14 breweries in the province but, centuries ago, there were many more. Despite the small number of breweries still in existence, beer culture is very much alive and well, and new, local beers are regularly developed or rediscovered here. There are several prominent specialty beer cafes, and many internationally acclaimed beer festivals take place in the Province. Moreover, several beer gems are brewed here, including the famous “Bolleke Koninck” in the city of Antwerp; the deliciously foamy Duvel beer from Breendonk and the widely appreciated Westmalle Trappist beer. Het Anker in Mechelen is one of the oldest breweries in Belgium and is known the world over for its Gouden Carolus Classic.



Ghent and the Province of East Flanders

In the Gruut city brewery in Ghent, visitors can taste beer among the brewing tanks, while young, talented, Ghent-based chefs like to make creative use of beer as an ingredient in their dishes. For example, De Heeren van Liedekercke, In Denderleeuw, has been named the best beer gourmet restaurant in the world. Ghent or East Flemish beer can be enjoyed in authentic or very trendy beer cafés which serve crisp, sour, brown beers from Oudenaarde in the Flemish Ardennes alongside renowned specialty beers such as Delirium Tremens, Augustijn and Tripel Karmeliet. The beers can be tasted during a beer tour by bike or on foot, or while visiting a brewery. There are several authentic breweries in this region, including Roman, which is over 400 years old, and the famous Liefmans brewery.



Bruges and the Province of West Flanders

The people of Bruges regularly appreciate a good beer, especially when brewed in their city. Bruges has three city beers: Straffe Hendrik, Brugse Zot and Bourgogne de Flandres - all internationally praised, distinctive beers that always leave visitors wanting more. The Bruges Beer Festival is an opportunity to discover even more hidden treasures. West Flanders probably owes its name as a beer province to the Trappist beers of Westvleteren. The American website, Ratebeer.com, once again honoured Westvleteren 12 with the title of world's best beer. Other breweries around Poperinge, the hop region, are also in the world's top 50. A West Flemish beer style, reddish-brown beers that spend months ageing in oak barrels at Rodenbach, is becoming increasingly popular.



Province of Limburg

Visitors to Limburg will find Trappists with their own brewery and an open brewing hall in Achel; the biggest European industrial archaeological beer museum in Bocholt, and an authentic 19th-century brewery-distillery in Wilderen. The nicest Limburg breweries can be found in stunning historic and cultural heritage sites such as Ter Dolen Castle in Houthalen-Helchteren, where visitors can often still see the brewers at work. A tour of the Limburg breweries is bound to come up to everyone's expectations, thanks to the diversity of their products and the warm welcome. Visitors can even take a bike on a discovery tour using the bicycle network to map out a route past breweries and a selection of bike-friendly pubs and restaurants that cherish and promote Limburg's regional beers.

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OFFERING TOURS TO BELGIUM



Beer & Bike Tours

Fort Collins, CO

www.beerandbiketours.com



Bon Beer Voyage

Boynton Beach, FL

www.bonbeer.com



BeerCycling

Portland, OR

www.beercycling.com



Brewtopia

Athens, GA

www.classiccitybrew.com/brewtopiatrips.html



BeerMBA

Carmel, IN

www.beerMBA.com



EF Go Ahead

Cambridge, MA

www.goaheadtours.com



Beertrips.com

Missoula, MT

www.beertrips.com



Inner Circle Beer Tours

New York, NY

www.innercircuitours.com



Belgian Beer Me

Grand Marais, MI

www.belgianbeerme.com



Inside Europe

Los Angeles, CA

www.inside-europe.com

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Short Hills Tours

Short Hills, NJ

www.shorthillstours.com



Taste Vacations

Red Lodge, MT

www.tastevacations.com



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