

Where Great Beer Starts Siebel Institute Raw Materials and Wort Production Course www.SiebelInstitute.com

SBP-Breweries high tech brewery plants reasonable prices, made in EC www.sbp-breweries.com

Brew beer equipment Microbrewery Systems worldwide Planning & Pricelist of Supplies www.brauhaus-austria.com



Ads by Google

The Trouble with German Beer

What's gone wrong?

Introduction

Do you think that German is the beer-drinker's paradise on earth? Do you believe that the Reinheitsgebot guarantees that only high quality beer is produced in Germany ? Do you think that the 1200 or so breweries in the country provide unparalleled diversity? Well I certainly don't. I'll explain why.

What's the problem?

Ask Mr Average his opinion and a likely soundbite reply would most likely be along the lines of "The Germans brew good, pure beer". The 'purity' of the end product and the enviable skill of those who make it are certainly points the industry itself likes to emphasise. But how accurately does this reflect the true situation?

I've become increasingly sceptical of the image German beer projects of itself. I'm not greatly impressed with the majority of it and consider it to be terribly overrated. There *are* excellent beers, but the general standard isn't particularly high. Parallels can be drawn with the sad situation in Czech Republic since the disappearance of the Iron Curtain. Variety, character and flavour are disappearing without anyone seeming to care, or even to notice.

There are several very worrying features of the contemporary German beer scene:

1. the lack of knowledge about beer amongst drinkers
2. the blind belief in the Reinheitsgebot as an assurance of quality beer
3. the absence of innovation in beer styles and flavours
4. the narrow range of styles brewed
5. the emphasis on cheap, low-quality beer
6. the insularity of German beer culture
7. the scarcity and poor quality of published information on beer in German

Let's have a look now at each of these points in detail.

1. Badly Informed Consumers

I'm married to a German and consequently have a number of German friends and relatives. When I discussed beer with them, I was struck by their lack of basic knowledge of how it's brewed and how it tastes. The basic differentiation between top- and bottom-fermentation was new to them.

German friends, living in Baden-Württemberg, hadn't tried the excellent local beers. They drank Beck's - even though there was a small brewery in the town where they

lived. I introduced them to weissbier and tried to explain a little about the possibilities the beer world could present. It was interesting to see how, armed with a little knowledge, they became more adventurous and more critical when drinking beer. (At least that's what I like to think. They were probably just humouring me and went straight back to the meths as soon as I left.)

Franconia, of course, where the best lagers in the world are brewed, is a different story. There's little that can compare with a kellerbier served by gravity from a wooden barrel. They're the bottom-fermented equivalent of British cask-conditioned ales and intrinsically superior to any processed beer.

The only problem is, you can't find these beers outside of a very limited area. While in Britain cask beer has a broad following, kellerbier appears to be appreciated by only a small group of enthusiasts.

In Belgium, 70% of the market may be boring pils, but a large part of the remaining 30% consists of natural, bottle-conditioned beers. Serious beers have a significant share. Yet in Germany, characterful Franconian beers aren't greatly appreciated outside their homeland.

2. The Millstone of the Reinheitsgebot

The Reinheitsgebot is often praised to the extent that it would appear to be Germany's greatest contribution to world culture. At the very least, it's seen as a piece of consumer protection to which all countries should aspire. Over the years I've read and heard various tosh about the Reinheitsgebot, expressing the received view that it is 'a good thing'.

My view is rather different. It's main effect (and no doubt a big factor in the Bavarian's insistence on its extension to cover the whole of Germany) was the destruction of North German beer culture. The restrictions of its rules go totally against hundreds of years of tradition in the north.

Today it continues to limit the styles of beer which can be brewed. Should some adventurous brewer want to recreate the lost glories of Broyhan or Jopenbier, he would find it difficult to do with any degree of authenticity.

Virtually none of the classic Belgian ales is, or even *can* be brewed if you stick to the rules of the Reinheitsgebot. Framboos and kriek use fruit (hardly a cheap replacement for malt), La Chouffe and witbiers spices - neither of which is allowed. Given the choice between Heineken Pils and La Chouffe, I know which I would go for.

Considering the number of breweries it possesses, Germany is home to relatively few beer styles. Bavaria, with hundreds of breweries, has only a handful of different styles. Belgium, on the other hand, with its open-minded approach to ingredients, has almost as many styles as breweries. Even Austria, with only 90-odd breweries, easily matches Germany.

I have a [Reinheitsgebot page](#) which rants on at greater length about its evil influence. Have a look if you want to read my description of its horns and cloven hooves.

3. Lack of Innovation

Unlike other major beer-drinking countries, there has been no microbrewery revolution in Germany and no rediscovery of old styles.

The only new breweries I have heard of are brewpubs. In my experience these don't brew much that's very exciting, sticking to a pale and a dark lager, which differentiate themselves from the products of larger breweries by being unfiltered.

There seems little interest in reviving any extinct beer types, even in towns with illustrious brewing pasts such as Hamburg or Hannover. (How many Germans have ever heard of Jopenbier or [Broyhan?](#)). Equally, there is no experimentation with new ideas, partly because of the restrictions of the Reinheitsgebot, partly through a lack of nerve and, more worryingly, technical ability.

German brewers are very competent when it comes to brewing consistent, stable lagers, but don't have much idea about anything else. The brewer in an American micro would be expected to have a mastery in the brewing of a wide variety of types. No Belgian brewer would be considered fully trained if he was only capable of brewing pils. I would be interested to hear of any new beer type developed in the last 30 years in Germany. Novelties like ice beer and whisky malt beers excepted, I know of none.

4. Lack of Diversity

Northern Germany is particularly bad for beer choice. The presence of Pilsner is overwhelming. Apart from the alt biers in [Düsseldorf](#), [Pinkus Muller](#) and [Berliner Weisse](#), I can't think of any interesting beers. Which is very sad, if you look at the pre-lager tradition of the region. A tradition that had far more in common with Belgian brewing than with the bottom-fermenting practices of South Germany. Once, there was the same multiplicity of styles that still survives in Belgium and the same open-minded approach to ingredients and techniques. Today, centuries of top-fermenting culture are represented by the handful of examples I've already named.

The foundation of industrial bottom-fermenting brewing companies and the forced introduction of the Reinheitsgebot (vigorously opposed, it's worth noting, by North German brewers) after German unification destroyed the top-fermenting tradition. Around 99% percent of beer styles disappeared in the 50 years before the First World War. Compared to the current choice of pils, pils or more pils, the [diversity of styles](#) pre-1850 is dazzling.

The Belgians, of course, have always had a very open-minded and individual attitude to brewing. New products are continually appearing and the choice of tastes available to the consumer is increasing. In Germany the opposite is true, as local styles disappear and pils continues its upward rise.

The thousands of brands produced by the 1200 or so breweries is often cited as a demonstration of diversity and choice. It's slightly misleading, given that the majority fall into a [couple of categories](#) and that individual beers in a category may have very small variations in flavour.

German consumers don't help. A survey in 2006 of 500 drinkers from all over Germany by the Linzer market-Institut (Brauwelt 2007, Issue 3, page 44) found that 50% had only bought one brand of beer in the last 3 months. Amongst the remaining 50%, the majority had not bought more than three. While 60% of drinkers limited themselves to drinking only Pils, 21% had never even tried it. For other mainstream styles the results were even worse: 36% had never drunk Hefeweizen, 44% no Schwarzbier and 65% no Kölsch. More exotic styles such as Rauchbier or even Bock were virtually unknown.

5. Too Much Supermarket Beer

Massive overcapacity in the industry and the resulting cut-throat competition have led to many breweries selling at ludicrously low prices. This has encouraged consumers to base their purchasing decisions purely on price, a situation disastrous for beer quality. As cost-cutting measures are implemented, so beer quality declines. Cheaper ingredients and shorter lagering are the easy options.

With drinkers likely to be swayed by the odd pfennig difference in the price, there's not much incentive for a brewer to strive for high standards. It may sound perverse, but an increase in price for top-quality beer would benefit the discerning drinker. The price differentials for beer are ludicrously small. A bottle of Westvleteren at the top end of the quality range costs maybe 3 times as much as a bottle of Leffe or Grimbergen in the industrial swill niche. Yet still I hear people complain about the price of Westvleteren. Take a look at the wine world: a top of the range Burgundy will set you back a few **hundred** times more than a plastic bottle of table wine.

If a brewery knows that better-quality beer commands a higher price, it makes economic sense to stick with traditional methods, rather than cut costs. The current structure of the German market is the exact opposite. Drinkers are telling brewers that a low price is paramount. The effect on the end product is easy to taste.

6. "Germany Has the Best Beer in the World"

The whole German industry strikes me as very inward-looking with scant attention paid to developments elsewhere in the world. Ideas have been swapped around between Britain, the USA and Belgium in the last two decades. Particularly in the USA and Britain, the willingness to experiment in the formulation of recipes has increased enormously.

In Scandinavia, Holland, France, brewers have taken note of developments in the wider world and the more daring ones have tried something new themselves. Almost everywhere in the world, renewed attention is being paid to the wide range of possibilities beer can offer. Except in Germany, where pale lager is still regarded by drinkers and brewers alike as 'normal beer'.

Michael Jackson remarked on this lack of choice and stylistic conservatism when he addressed members of the German industry recently. He dared to suggest that the Germans were failing to keep up with the rest of the world and that this could start to affect their export markets. I have a feeling that his words fell on deaf ears.

I subscribe to [Brauwelt](#) (the German brewers' trade magazine) and they occasionally make similar remarks in their editorials. Nonetheless, the articles, though full of very detailed technical information, are pretty well 100% orientated to Germany. Reports on the rest of the world concentrate on the business side and mostly concern which foreign brewery has bought which other foreign brewery. Next to nothing is said about the types of beer brewed elsewhere. I can't remember reading anything at all about Belgian beer, which is establishing itself as the benchmark for quality at the top end of the market.

My role as beer obsessive includes having subscriptions to magazines from a wide range of countries - Belgium, Holland, Great Britain, the USA, Sweden, Norway, France and Switzerland. All of these, even though some are only produced by amateurs on a voluntary basis, make an attempt to discuss the beer culture of other countries.

7. Where are the German Books on Beer?

I've always found it odd that, in a country as proud of its beer as Germany, so little has been published on the subject. A German bookshop is likely to have 100 or more books on wine, a dozen on whisky and three on beer, if you're lucky. And two of those will be translations of English works.

I only know one book ('**Die Biere Deutschlands**' by Höllhuber and Kaul) which attempts to describe seriously and objectively the beers and breweries of the whole country. The best German-language writer about the international beer scene is an Austrian, [Conrad Seidl](#) ('**Noch ein Bier**' and '**Hopfen und Malz**').

I've yet to find any book written by a German that could speak in any depth or with any authority about foreign beer. There are a few good guides to homebrew pubs and beer gardens in the South of Germany, but the best one I have to Munich pubs was written by an American ([Larry Hawthorne's 'The Beer Drinker's Guide to Munich'](#) - an invaluable book for visitors to Munich, especially those wanting to find the Forschungsbrauerei).

Belgium - where the potential audience is far smaller - has produced a number of detailed studies on various beer topics in both Flemish and French. In English, there is now an enormous range of published material, much of it of a high standard. Even France, where beer consumption is much lower than in Germany, has a respectable beer literature. The poor availability of information cannot be good for the appreciation and understanding of beer by the German public.

[Thomas Perera](#) wrote [an article](#) which first appeared in What's Brewing and makes similar points about Germans and their beer.

Questions? Suggestions? [Click to email me.](#)

More German Beer Pages	
German pub guides	German Brewery Pages
Augsburg Pub Guide	The breweries of Bamberg
Bamberg Pub Guide	The breweries of Berlin
Berlin Pub Guide	The breweries of Baden-Württemberg
Duisburg Pub Guide	The breweries of the Former DDR
Düsseldorf Pub Guide	The breweries of Düsseldorf
Eisenach Pub Guide	The breweries of Munich
Hamburg Pub Guide	
Cologne (Köln) Pub Guide	German Beer Articles
Leipzig Pub Guide	The Trouble with German Beer
Munich Pub Guide	Old German Beer Styles
Nürnberg (Nuremberg) Pub Guide	German Beer Statistics
Stuttgart Pub Guide	Why the Reinheitsgebot is old bollocks
	Buying German Beer in the USA
More Beer Pages	
Main index page	

© Ron Pattinson 1997 - 2010