

APPELLATION BEER

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Reinheitsgebot as Einheitsgebot?

“[Brauereisterben: The sad state of German beer culture](#)” has been making the rounds since *Slate* posted it yesterday. Not exactly news to those who have been paying attention. But *Slate* doesn’t devote much bandwidth to beer, and doesn’t count among those paying attention.

The word *Brauereisterben*, drawn for the term for Germany’s dying forests (*Waldsterben*), has been around since the mid-90s. No disputing that beer production and consumption are sinking, but when Americans are called upon to comment on anybody else’s beer culture we should take care using words like “sad state” in the headline.

It would have been one thing had Germans said just that in the story, but it hardly reads as if they were consulted. Additionally, the supporting evidence was at times questionable — or best I can tell plain wrong.

For instance, the statement that Berlin supported 700 breweries in the early nineteenth century. According to Ron Pattinson’s meticulously documented [European Beer Guide](#) [82 breweries operated in Berlin](#) in 1800 and 42 by 1816. Go back to 1730 and 426 existed, but most of those would have been in homes. Where does the number 700 come from? Perhaps [Wikipedia](#), which in turns cites the German Beer Institute. [Pattinson has documented](#) just a few of the errors there.

Or there is the aside that German beer production is less than half of the United States’ output — not surprising since Germany has only something more than a quarter the population.

What’s missing from the story would bother me even more if had Sylvia Kopp, who is German, not made the German view the center of a story she wrote for *All About Beer Magazine* three years ago. [She wrote](#), “However, most Germans, when asked what beer they prefer, will answer, passionately, with a brand name. This is the German paradox: we love beer dearly, it is an integral part of our culture, yet it has become a commodity.”

The challenge is not unique to Germany. Brewers everywhere want to make regular beers special enough that they are not a commodity, but still regular beers. (Yes, there is another category of beers that are stronger, hoppier, include ingredients beyond the norm, and they are *one* way for brewers to make a statement that “Everything I make is special.”)

Kopp talked to brewers about this.

Sebastian B. Priller, the junior owner and manager of Brauhaus Riegele, the foremost independent brewer in Augsburg, holds a clear opinion: “When it comes to beer, Germans focus more on marketing, branding, sponsoring, pricing and all that, instead of talking about the product itself. I think it is high time to put the beer first: its taste, its ingredients, the way it is brewed, the food it pairs with. And we need to live this culture and celebrate beer like they do with wine.”

And of course she addressed the matter of the *Reinheitsgebot* (the story was headlined, “[Ruled by the Reinheitsgebot?](#)”) As did [Barry M at the Bitten Bullet](#) in commenting on the *Slate* story, noteworthy because he’s an Irishman living in Germany. We get a look at this sucker from enough angles we might be able to figure it out.

So one more view. From a man born in Wyoming, who has lived in Europe and Germany for more than 20 years and been the brewmaster at Private Landbrauerei Schönram for 13 years. The Bavarian brewery in Petting/Schönram — not far from Salzburg, Austria — has more than doubled its sales during that time.

Eric Toft has succeeded by emphasizing quality ingredients and traditional brewing methods, but he’s also an agent of change. Last week he bottled his first IPA in 750ml corked bottles. Most of that will go to Italy.

He is a member of *Bier-Quer-Denker*, a group of brewers who look both within Germany and beyond for inspiration. *Bier-Quer-Denker*, roughly translated means “beer lateral thinker.” For instance, for one seminar Frank Mueller from Brauhaus Riegele brought a *kellerbier* made with a mixture of three grains, including wheat, and fermented with an English ale yeast.

Toft makes a strong argument that the *Reinheitsgebot* should not limit a brewer.

“There has been a collective, though not all brewers are guilty of this, mass misinterpretation of the *Reinheitsgebot* — *Reinheitsgebot* as *Einheitsgebot*, meaning all beer must taste the same or all brands are interchangeable. Over the years, processes and technology in the breweries have also become very similar. I see the *Reinheitsgebot* as just the opposite,” he said. “Because we are forced to work within these narrow confines, we should see it as motivation for creativity and opportunity to set our brands apart from the others. This begins with the selection of the raw materials and carries through the entire process.

“The *Reinheitsgebot* should be a guarantee for the greatest diversity possible, unfortunately the opposite is true. But consider this: worldwide, 199 different hop varieties are cultivated. In Germany alone, we have 23 different varieties of two-row barley. The yeast bank in Weihenstephan lists 80 strains on their regular list, and more are available on request. Luckily, there is more than a handful of brewers around who are swimming against the tide.”

They aren’t ready to leave the German beer culture for dead.

Posted: March 3rd, 2011 under [Beer culture](#), [Beers of conviction](#).

9 Responses to “Reinheitsgebot as Einheitsgebot?”

1. *Mike* Says:

[March 4th, 2011 at 4:00 am](#)

I read a US travel site occasionally and a British poster there wrote this the other day: “I’m suprised at how much Americans seem keener to listen more to other Americans for advice about Europe ... and seem to give less weight from people actually living here and who know the areas intimately .”

The article seems to me a fine example of this. For example, there is this: “There are only about 20 common styles used for brewing in Germany whereas craft brewers in the United States are working ably in at least 100.”

Or, perhaps better, this: “Innovation is happening, if slowly, but German brewers and the drinking public will need to truly embrace change to get the country out of its rut.”

German beer in a rut? Much of the decline in German beer production, I believe, comes from the industrial breweries. Most of Germany’s breweries are rather small and losing a few hectoliters here or there would not account for the loss of millions of hectoliters.

Secondly, innovation. Consider some of the “innovations” in the US: fast-food, instant coffee, Tang, supermarket quality, etc. Sure many of these products returned millions in profits to their producers, but what have they contributed to the quality of life of the consumers? “Innovation” can lower, rather than improve, products and is not, per se, synonymous with improvement.

Last summer, I was in a Zoiglstube in a small village in Germany. I got there at the end of the lunch hour. The place was packed with both young and old and all ages in between. The beer and food were so good, I stayed the entire afternoon and the place remained reasonably full during the entire time I was there.

I don’t think that place was in a rut, nor do I think the brewer has as low an opinion of German beer as the author of the article.

I’m off to Zum Ürige in a few weeks — that is, if we can find seats.

2. *Barry M* Says:

[March 4th, 2011 at 6:12 am](#)

Well, “Reinheitsgebot as Einheitsgebot, meaning all beer must taste the same or all brands are interchangeable” sums it up much better than I did! 😊

I’ve been changing my mind, and I’ll be trying hard tnot to rant against the ‘gebot in future.

Though tonight, I’ll be drinking mediocre, yeasty Helles and a decent Dunkel in my local brewpub.

3. *Steve* Says:

[March 4th, 2011 at 6:50 am](#)

Stan — great second (third? fourth?) perspective on the story. As Mike mentions, many at BA spoke about their experiences in Germany, but I coaxed Stahlsturm out of hiding to tell us about the thriving brewery scene in Regensburg — maybe Barry ought to check out their yeasty Helles and decent Dunkels (I’d feel for you Barry, but your grass is much greener than mine from where I sit right now! 😊).

4. *Andy Crouch* Says:

[March 4th, 2011 at 7:28 am](#)

Hey Stan, great article. I've had Christian's Slate article up on my computer for several days with the intention of drafting a similar response but could not find the time. You've done much better than I would have. I found the article disturbing for a number of reasons but to try and add some value here, it really just fails to comprehend the true spirit and nature of German beer/brewing/beer culture. I've traveled the country pretty extensively over the last decade, from Windischeschenbach and Zoigl country in the East to alt and kolsch country in Dusseldorf/Cologne and tiny Franconian hamlets in-between. And what I see along the way is a great appreciation for tradition, flavor, and style. I certainly understand that many in younger generations have gone very different routes in their tastes, but that is happening widely in Belgium, Britain, and the Czech Republic as well. The true essence of German brewing is not found in the wildness of recipes but in the joy of contemplating beautiful simplicity in half-liter mugs with friends (old and new) in a beer garden or old pub.

Americans largely just don't understand German beer and culture in general and lager in particular. They view it as one big Oktoberfest/Hofbrauhaus clusterfuck, like the Disneyland of drinking, and this article sort of reflects that mindset. If it's not innovating, it must be dying.

I don't have the numbers handy but the comparison with Belgium regarding the Reinheitsgebot in the article is also misguided. While Belgians may have more "freedom" to add ingredients, that hasn't led to any sustained, guaranteed success. As in Germany, beer drinking by Belgians continues to decline every year and what is largely being consumed (Jupiler, etc) is not our American idea of Belgian beer. The saving grace for Belgians has been the export markets. As a quick test, try and find Cantillon anywhere in the country (even in Brussels) at some place other than a beer bar that caters to foreign beer drinking tourists. You can't. Some massive percentage of the brewery's production heads to the US, Britain, and as far away as Vietnam.

There is great and beautiful innovation that can occur within the illusory walls of the Reinheitsgebot and it is slowly beginning to build in Germany.

Best,

Andy

5. *Mike Says:*
[March 4th, 2011 at 10:19 am](#)

Andy, you make some very good points and I agree with much of what you wrote about Germany, but, I'm sorry to say, you don't seem to have the same understanding of Belgium.

First of all, (about Germany) you wrote Germans have "a great appreciation for tradition, flavor, and style." Not quite. Unless you consider dunkelés a "style" (I don't). Germans, like many other Europeans, also appreciate what they call "gemütlichkeit".

About Belgium, the industrial beer share of the market has been dropping sharply from a high of about 77 percent in the 1980s or 90s and is now closer to 60 percent. Beer consumption is losing somewhat to wine and water sales.

Cantillon and all geuze/lambic is a local specialty in the Zenne valley just outside Brussels. In that area, Cantillon, as well as the other lambic producers can indeed be found in local pubs. But, just as in Germany, you won't find regional specialties outside the area of production. Try finding a kolsch in Düsseldorf, for example.

As far as innovation is considered, why? German beers aren't already good enough? Or Belgian beers?

Whatever happened to the expression: if it's not broken, don't fix it?

6. *Andy Crouch Says:*
[March 4th, 2011 at 12:51 pm](#)

Hi Mike-

Not to get into a back and forth here in the comments section but as to my German point that you took issue with, allow me to clarify: I'm not saying that German beer drinkers appreciate the style distinctions in the manner that beer geeks demand in the states. I'm saying that German brewers, in their determined provincialism, isolate style flavors.

As to Belgium, I'd like to see the source for the numbers you quote. I've also spent a lot of time in Belgium in the last decade but don't necessarily follow the business numbers that often. My understanding of the numbers, however, still supports my original position. I'd certainly be willing to be proven wrong with some sourced material.

And finally to your Cantillon point, I'm not sure I'd define lambic so narrowly. My experience in Brussels (been a half dozen times) and in talking with Belgians is that Cantillon is largely considered an export product by locals and is indeed not widely available (compared to other similarly sized Belgian breweries). And I'd strongly disagree with your point that you can't find regional Belgian beers in other parts of the country. That's just silly. (And I have found kolsch in Dusseldorf and alt in Cologne...)

As to your final lines, I agree as was hopefully made clear in my post.

Best,

Andy

7. *Jason Says:*
[March 4th, 2011 at 2:16 pm](#)

Just a quick comment.

A friend of mine in Ghent, who hails from the US, often remarks that he'll usually go out with his Belgian colleagues and they'll all have Jupiler if they are spending the night at a pub. At the same time, most of them enjoy traditional Belgian beers and have their favorites. Different beers have their time and place.

8. *Barm Says:*
[March 4th, 2011 at 4:55 pm](#)

Superb post Stan. This type of article seems to appear regularly in the US press nowadays and I find them rather tiresome. To me they always have the same unpleasant undertone: the sleepy Europeans need American intervention to teach them how to do things properly, the American way.

Interestingly Belgian brewing doesn't appear to get the same amount of criticism stateside as German brewing does. I suspect this is partly because the Belgian beer culture is somewhat more similar to American beer geek culture than the German is: high ABV, top-fermentation, cafes with a wide selection.

9. *Mike Says:*
[March 6th, 2011 at 2:56 am](#)

Hi Andy – I was at ZBF yesterday, so didn't get a chance to reply. I'd be happy to continue this discussion, but I agree that this is probably not the best place to do that. Stan has my email address. Why not ask him for it (or Stan, if you read this, could you...) and we can continue via email? I hope that's OK.

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