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The German Reinheitsgebot

506 Years of Purity?

By Jan Brücklmeier

The German Reinheitsgebot, translated literally as the “purity commandment,” is often called the oldest still-valid food purity law, having been in place in Germany since 1516 without major changes. This statement couldn’t be more wrong.

Everyone seems to know the facts—that Bavarian dukes Wilhelm IV and Ludwig X proclaimed the Reinheitsgebot in Ingolstadt on April 23, 1516, and that this exact law, to protect the purity of beer, has been in place in Germany ever since. Also, many brewers around the globe know the famous words:

We wish especially that, henceforth and everywhere, in our towns, markets, and in the countryside, shall be employed and used in no beer more constituents than alone barley, hops, and water.



(Original: *Ganz besonders wollen wir, dass forthin allenthalben in unseren Städten, Märkten und auf dem Lande zu keinem Bier mehr Stücke als allein Gersten, Hopfen und Wasser verwendet und gebraucht werden sollen.*)

I don't know how many copies of the proclamations adorn the walls of breweries and bars worldwide today. Unfortunately, I am here to destroy your romantic dreams about brewing purity.

THE LAW OF THE LANDS

First, there was no such thing as Germany in 1516, when Wilhelm and Ludwig were dukes of Bavaria. The "Bavaria" they ruled at that time was much smaller than the modern state of Bavaria. At best, their decree would have been the "Bavarian purity law" or, more precisely, the purity law of the Bavarian Duchy.

Second, the 31 words dealing with beer ingredients are just one part of an entire book called the *Landesordnung*, or general code of law. This book has four parts and deals with topics like how to deal with murderers or muggers and how and when to apply torture in interrogations. It was never just a

REINHEITSGEBOT

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*Wilhelm IV & Ludwig X
Ingolstadt, Germany, April 23, 1516*

proclaimed law for beer ingredients. In fact, a larger part of the law that concerns beer actually addresses the price of it.

Third, the 1516 law has nothing to do with the purity of beer. The food supply

in the 1500s was anything but secure. Compared to wheat, barley is a relatively undermanding crop that can grow on comparatively unfertile ground. Critically, though, barley can't be used to bake bread due to its low gluten content. So, to secure wheat for use in bread production, Wilhelm and Ludwig banned its use in brewing. Had they truly been convinced of barley's "purity" for brewing, it would have been crazy for them to allow the Baron of Degenberg in 1548, only 33 years after the proclamation of the "Reinheitsgebot," to brew wheat beer and to make brewing with wheat a privilege of the royals.

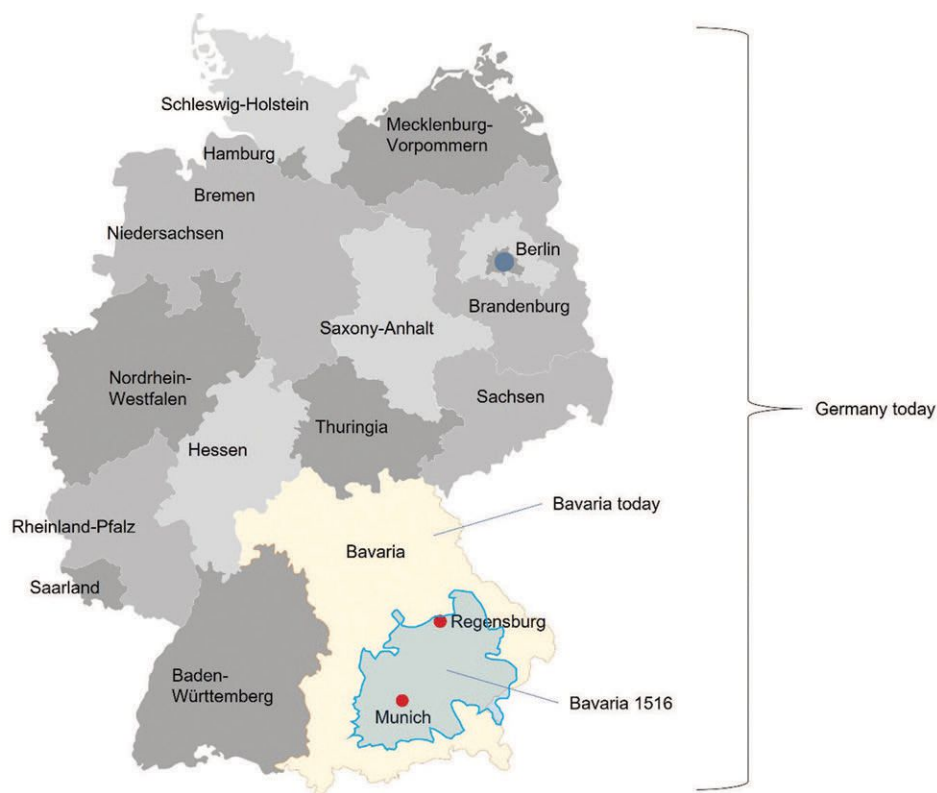
Fourth, parts of the law were changed only four years later after the original decree had been issued. In 1520, the very same Wilhelm IV changed the beer price in the law. True, he didn't change the allowable ingredients—that part of the law was changed by his son,

Albrecht V, in 1551, who allowed coriander and bay leaves in beer. Later, in 1616, Maximilian added salt, juniper, and caraway to the list.

As noted earlier, the Reinheitsgebot was proclaimed in the Duchy of Bavaria, which was a small part of today's modern state. But even when the law became binding in the entire state of Bavaria, the Kingdom of Bavaria at that time in 1806, it was not law in the rest of Germany as we know it today. This didn't happen until 1906, when Bavaria joined the German Empire. So, for the first 390 years of its existence, the Reinheitsgebot was not a German law; it was only binding in Bavaria.

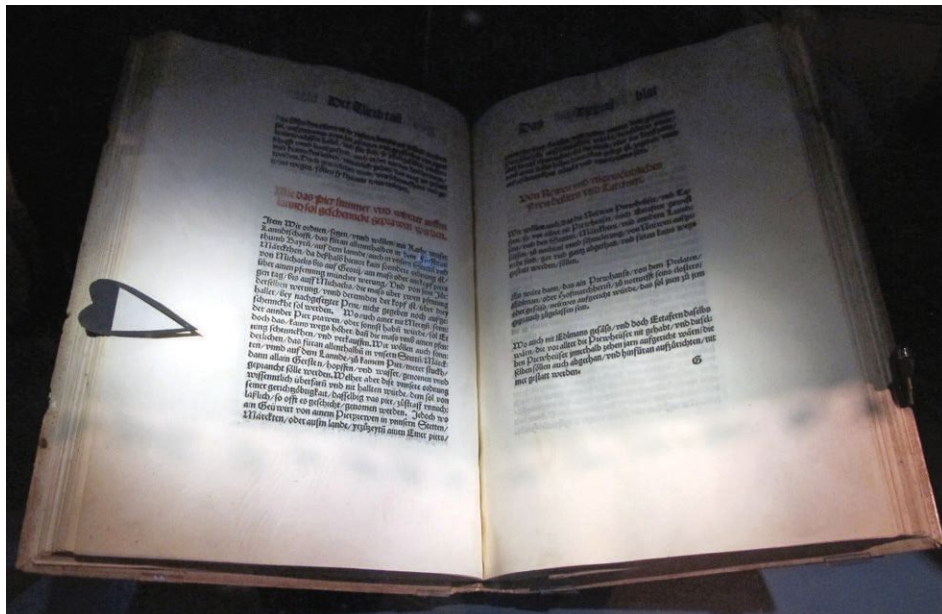
After the Second World War ended, the regulation was only valid for West Germany. East Germany, the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik* or DDR), had different laws that allowed such ingredients as sugar, rice, corn, and enzymes. There, the Reinheitsgebot was called the TGL 7764. The "German" purity law was not binding for Germany in its entirety for 431 out of 506 years.

Fifth, it was never called the Reinheitsgebot when it was first proclaimed. The term was probably first used in 1909 in the petition committee in Berlin by treasury senior civil servant Joseph Rheinboldt during a discussion about



Bavaria, 1516.

Credit: Jan Brückmeier, 2022



Bayrische Landesordnung.

Credit: Wikimedia Commons



The Reinheitsgebot as a marketing tool: Label of wheat beer, claiming to be brewed according to the purity law of 1516 even though the original regulation excluded the use of wheat.

Credit: Tom Tiburon

brewing processes. The first documented use of the term is from 1918 in a transcript of the Bavarian Parliament.

Last, there are much older brewing laws and regulations. When the *Landesordnung* was proclaimed, the first known regulation had already been in place for more than 350 years. Even the limitation of the grist to barley is much older—the oldest known, still-existing source dates to 1302 in Nuremberg. The brewing law of Weimar from 1348 made hops mandatory. Towards the end of the 1400s, most brewing regulations included the absolute same ingredients as the so-called Reinheitsgebot: barley, water, and hops.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

I apologize for destroying your imagination, but I'm not done. Sorry.

You might argue now that you have seen a copy with the signature and seal of duke Wilhelm on so many walls around the globe. There must be a grain of truth to the story—you saw it with your own eyes.

You must be strong now. Even these copies are a total fake. The seal is not the seal of Duke Wilhelm IV, the signature is not his, and the original document is a page out of a book. There is no single document entitled *Reinheitsgebot*.

One final comment. It is often said that yeast is not part of the regulation since it was not known at the time it was written. Again, sorry, this is not true. Much older regulations, such as the *Bamberger Ungeldordnung*, a brewing regulation from 1489, mentions barley, hops, water, and yeast.

It may sound like I have a problem with the Reinheitsgebot, but this is not the case. I think it helped make Bavarian beer, the foundation of our culture, famous around the world. It also lay the fertile ground for the number of breweries that still produce beer. As an example, the lowest number of breweries in the USA was 89 active breweries in 1978, compared to 1,275 in Germany in 2003, nearly 40 times as many per capita.

But I think it should be seen as what it is and was—not a law to ensure the purity of beer, but a law to ensure the competitiveness of Bavarian beer and Bavarian breweries. Wine was the preferred drink in Bavaria for a very long time. That changed in the late 1400s as the climate began to cool in the so-called Little Ice Age. Temperatures in Bavaria, once famous for wine, fell below what was needed to grow wine grapes. Thus began Bavarians' ever-lasting love for beer.

Northern German cities, in particular the cities of the Hanseatic League, were famous for their beer, which they produced en masse. Hamburg, for example, produced close to 315,000 barrels at the end of the 1400s, with only one-sixth consumed within the city. The rest was exported.

The issue the Bavarian monarch had with this was that taxation of beer was indirect at that time. Beer itself wasn't taxed, but its production was. This meant that if more beer were imported, less tax could be collected. Bavarian beer was already well-known, unfortunately for its bad quality. Hence, Bavarian sovereigns had an interest in increasing quality so

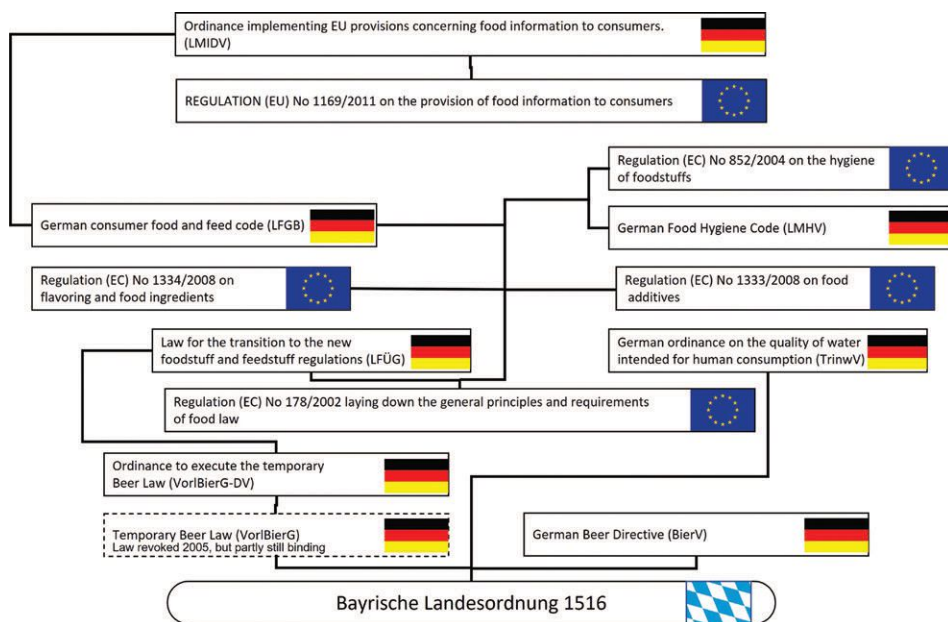
that their subjects would import less beer and drink more Bavarian beer, thus increasing tax revenue. This might also have been one of the reasons why the regulation only mentions malt, hops, and water, but not yeast. Malt and hops were taxed, but yeast was not. Also, hops were farmed in Bavaria, unlike the gruit that was used in other beers.

1516 TO PRESENT

But what about the “Reinheitsgebot” today?

The initial regulation from 1516 was adapted several times. In 1806, the Electorate of Bavaria, together with Tyrol and Vorarlberg (today part of Austria), became the Kingdom of Bavaria, and the influence of the regulation was expanded to the entire national territory. In the same year, the mode for taxation changed as well. Now tax was calculated based on the amount of malt used to brew. It seems logical that the monarch of this time wasn't interested in any beer ingredient except (taxable) malt.

In 1861, the regulation became part of Bavarian law as the so-called *Surrogatsverbot* (surrogate ban). Surrogate, in the spirit and purpose of the law, meant replacements for barley malt and hops. In 1870, Bavaria became part of the *Norddeutscher Bund* (North German Confederation), but only on the condition that Bavaria retain its sovereignty to tax beer, a condition that was accepted. It's not surprising that the king insisted on this condition, since between 25 and 35 percent of Bavaria's tax revenue came from this source.



The modern “purity” law: Law and regulation concerning beer.

Credit: Jan Brücklmeier

In 1906, the entire German Reich adopted the Bavarian law. For lager beer, the law still dictated barley malt, hops, yeast, and water as the only allowed ingredients, but other malts and sugars were permitted for ales. If the beer was brewed for export, it could deviate from the law. But Bavaria, making use of its veto right, outlawed the use of sugar within its borders.

In 1923, the same rules were absorbed into the new *Biersteuergesetz* (beer taxation law), which was renewed in 1952 as law in the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany, again with stricter rules for Bavaria.

In 1958, Germany became part of the European Union. Until 1987, by law, only beer that was brewed according to this law was allowed to be imported

into Germany. This law was repealed by the European Union in 1987. In 1993, after West Germany had been reunited with East Germany, a new version of the *Biersteuergesetz* took effect.

In modern Germany, as part of the European Union, beer laws are everything but simple. I don’t want to overwhelm you, but if you’d like to dive into the mystery of the *Reinheitsgebot*, you can use the accompanying diagram to find all the applicable laws and regulations.

I must admit—those copies of the “*Reinheitsgebot*,” contrived though they may be, look considerably better on the wall of a brewhouse or pub than this chart does!

Born and raised in Munich, half a mile away from Oktoberfest and the Augustiner brewery, and with one grandmother in the beer business and the other a former pub owner, Jan Brücklmeier’s destiny was almost predetermined. He brewed his first batch of beer in the late 1980s and made his passion a profession when he studied brewing sciences and beverage technologies at the world-famous beer university, Weihenstephan, from which he holds a master’s degree. Jan has written two books about homebrewing and beer.

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