

COOKING WITH BELGIAN BEER.

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For Melissa Keymolen Lora

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FOREWORD.

Whenever I travel abroad, I realize that, being a Belgian, I live in a blessed beer country. I am not one of those people who look for food or drinks they know. I'll eat anywhere, whatever they're having. Generally I try to taste local specialties and as a rule I appreciate them (cutting down on dog and snake though). What I'm trying to say here: I will not get depressed if they don't serve me my favorite beers, but hey, every now and then a guy wants something else than pastis or wine, being a beer lover and all.

But there is some improvement. Since Anheuser-Busch InBev (am I right here? That's what they were called yesterday anyway) started conquering the globe, people abroad now know that we are not only the "chocolate people". Honor where honor is due. Without that beer giant things would never have taken off the way they have.

Ever since France succeeded in making its drinking and eating habits the standards, every self-respecting restaurant has an extensive wine list, preferably with French wines of course. Fortunately more and more Belgian restaurants also have a fairly wide range of beers, whereas our chefs sometimes experiment with dishes containing beer. Unfortunately, there is less space left for a restaurateur to be "creative" with the prices of beer than with those of wines. Many restaurants are more or less break even with their food, so they get their profits mainly from the (often exaggerated) prices of the wines they serve.

The intention of this book is mainly to show that there is a larger variety of beer dishes than Flemish beef stew or Flemish style rabbit (prepared with beer and prunes. Some Flemish, whenever they eat a prune, like to have a rabbit with it). However, you will also find those classics of Belgian cuisine in this book, and the same goes for fritter batter, another beer-based classic.

As an introduction I will also give an overview of Belgian beers that looks rather extensive at first sight, but is actually very concise.

The late Micael Jackson regularly flattered the vanity of the Belgians by proclaiming us the number one beer country of the world.

As far as variety is concerned, Belgium is still towering sky-high over the united foreign countries, but we should not be blind to some unwelcome developments. Such as "label beer" for instance. A brewery brews a certain beer and then places it on the market under several different names, whether or not on its own initiative.

And then there is the decline of table beer (which goes hand in hand with the rise of soft drinks and low alcohol or alcohol-free beers), the decline of mainly Walloon "Saisons" (which did not prevent the Flemish beer celebrity Jef Van den Steen to launch a "Saison d'Erpe-Mere", a marriage between the two Belgian Regions); there's also the sweetening of taste. On the other

hand, the Flemish lambics and geuzes that were close to disappearing, are back in action (the number of brewers and “blenders” was distressingly declining some decades ago), although in some cases concessions are made to popular tastes (sweet and strong seem easier to swallow), and moreover flavors tend to flatten due to mergers among brewers.

Who am I, but personally I think that we are still streets ahead of other countries, including the US of A (coming on strong, though, with their Belgian Style Ales). What I’m trying to say here: the number of creative newcomers is still increasing, the interest in beer has never been bigger, there seems to be some room within giants such as Anheuser-Busch InBev for free expression or return to the, uh, source (“De Kluis”, the brewery of Hoegaarden wheat beer – or white beer or “blanche” could finally stay in its home town Hoegaarden, after a brief relocation), some beers are more than back in action and more and more associations of beer tasters are being created, trying to jolt the brewers’ consciences. So things are not all that bad after all.

Maybe one has to be a foreigner (i.e. non-Belgian) to notice that in Belgium the offer of beers is displayed at the windows, that even in the smallest country pubs you get at least ten to fifteen different beers, that all beers are being served in their own type of glass, that most café owners follow courses to treat the beer as it should be.

WHAT IS BEER?

Yeah right, like I'm gonna slave away to explain something you know better than I. Okay, for you, madam, who never drank a Jupiler before in your life, because only men know why: beer is a beverage that is obtained by the alcoholic fermentation of wort, and prepared from starch and raw materials containing sugar, hops and brewing water. Of course, that's the most simple definition, because beer is a flag of many colors, especially in Belgium, as you will find out later on.

Most books and websites covering this topic, go into details on this issue. In a cookbook this has to be 'a little less'. Furthermore, I don't want you to fall asleep before you can start cooking. So let's just consider the general points.

The main basic raw material of beer is grain. Barley in the first place. Also wheat (wheat beer or white beer or 'blanche', but also lambic), but to a lesser extent, because wheat and rye can also be used for the baking of bread, historically speaking the most important food in Europe. Oat is also used but very rarely. And those other cereals, corn and rice are newcomers of non-European origin. So, as I said, mainly barley, and the brewing process broadly comes down to this: the barley is germinated, and then heated ("dried").

Afterwards the barley is grinded, and this germinated and ground barley mash is called malt. In my hometown of Aalst (East-Flanders) there used to be a large malt factory, called De Wolf – Cosyns, already part of Interbrew, that later became Inbev, the current Anheuser-Busch – InBev, but in 2002 the production was transferred to Leuven (Louvain), where Interbrew already had built a six story high malt factory. By the way, malt is also the basic raw material of whisky.

This malt is now poured into large vats and water is added (the quality and/or the characteristics of the water will play their role in the characteristics of the beer). This batter is then heated to about 75° C during 4 or 5 hours, stirring constantly. The batter is then racked and the remaining, filtered liquid is called wort.

The wort is then cooked in brewing boilers ("coppers", tanks) during approximately two hours. The purpose is that it should be sterilized (see below in the historical overview, the role of Pasteur), that it should thicken and that the enzymes should be destroyed.

Now the hops are added. They should give the desired bitterness, dryness and flavor to the beer, whereas it is also a natural anti-infective agent. Brewers only use the hop cones (the conic flower of the plant).

The hops are then removed, and after cooling the wort is transferred to large fermentation vats, where they will ferment for about ten days.

The yeast is converting the sugar into ethyl alcohol and into carbon dioxide. At the surface now appears a thick layer of foam. Starting from that moment one can speak of beer and no longer of wort.

This beer is stored to ripen. Eventually it is filtered.

FROM THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY TO THE LAND OF BEER AND CHOCOLATE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.

The Sorrow of Belgium (title of a book by Flemish writer Hugo Claus): we did not invent beer. Tough nut to crack for us.

We are not even in the top 10 of largest beer consumers. In the European Union we are head to head with the British, but the Austrians, the Luxembourgers, the Germans, the Danes and the Irish are ahead of us. And the Czechs, as always, finish first, stumbling, way ahead of all the rest. There is a source of comfort though: apart from the British they all get blind drunk in a kind of one-sided way, whereas we do it in style, as you will find out later on.

And we are not the biggest producers either: in 2012 we were seventh in Europe.

The good news show starts here and now: we have the largest number of different beers in the world, of which some are absolutely unique. Even an authority such as the late Michael Jackson – not the American one, but the British version, who has always been white and who could not dance – called us the beer country par excellence and expressed himself in lyrical terms, that could not only originate in the different types of beer he consumed during his research. The man even wrote a book exclusively dedicated to our beers, so go figure. And for once the Flemish and the Walloons fight side by side, as far as creativity, inventiveness and craftsmanship are concerned, not least under the banner of AB-Inbev, the numero uno of the Belgian brewers.

But I still owe you a historical overview.

Southerners produce and drink wine, Northerners produce and drink beer, that's the way it is. If the bravest of all Gauls (as Julius Caesar called the old Belgians) did not invent beer, than maybe their conquerors and our co-ancestors, the Germans or Teutons did, so maybe possibly we ... forget about it.

Who would ever have thought that the Mesopotamians invented this nectar of the Gods? (certainly not those who claim that the Chinese were the first ones, as you will read later on). Between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers – the ancient Mesopotamia of the Bible, in nowadays Iraq – they kept themselves occupied, some seven thousand years ago, with brewing a beverage that was remarkably similar to beer, as is proved by a recipe that was found on a clay tablet, dating from approximately six thousand years B.C. The tablet shows Sumerians – the indigenous people of the region at the time – who are cooking fermented grains, and others who let that brew cool down. How does one get the idea, being a Sumerian and all? The archeologists were not there, but excavations taught us that the people of those days swallowed a lot of pulpy substances, often in the form of crushed grains (mostly barley) that they mixed with water. By not giving in to their greed, or possibly because food was scarce at times, they kept leftovers for a rainy day, whereupon the not entirely crushed grains could germinate and starch was transformed into sugar. By fermenting and developing lactic acid bacteria, a slightly acidified porridge must have been the result. This porridge was the predecessor of beer. Where do they come up with it!? I mean both the Sumerians and the archeologists.

The Sumerians seem to have had approximately twenty types of beer, of which the “sikaru”, that played an important role in their religious culture. As a group activity, beer was drunk

from an earthenware pot with a straw, to avoid that chaff or other rubbish floating on the beverage, would enter the mouth. Just as our great-great-grandfathers, the Flemish farmers and workers from the nineteenth century, who ate their porridge with spoons out of a common pot (“Jeeze, what a hard lump!” “Ain’t it? I just had it in my mouth too.”).

Those Sumerians, who bore a resemblance with Mongols, were run over by a Semitic people (i.e. related to Jews and Arabs), that went down in history as the Babylonians. Those guys did not bother to take things over from their predecessors: writing for instance, that was probably invented by the Sumerians. Also all agricultural, scientific and religious developments. And apparently all culinary achievements. For the famous king Hammurabi, who went down in history as “the legislator”, ordered in 1800 B.C. among other things that the price of beer should stay affordable for all sections of the population. Furthermore, he imposed punishments to the baddies who dared to dilute beer with water (yeah, you, the Belgian over there, no more jokes about Heineken). Those who tampered with beer or made it bad, were drowned in a barrel of beer. An alcoholic could not imagine a more beautiful way of dying.

Afterwards, the preparation of beer must have spread from Babylon to Egypt, the coming superpower of those days, where the original procedure was refined and the beer started looking more like the one we know nowadays. Although the brewing process was kind of circuitous. The wife in Egypt already knew that fermented, dried and crushed grains gave better bread that was more durable. Those grains were diluted with water and knead into a dough, which was then slightly baked and was the raw material for the preparation of the beer. The baked mass was crumbled, once again diluted with water in a barrel and was then left to ferment a couple of days. Then the stuff went through a sieve, with beer as a result. The old, wise Flemish saying “Where the brewer passed, the baker does not have to come by” did not apply in those days, since these tradesmen were united in one single person

Ramses III had such a high opinion of beer, that he thought one should drink it out of gold cups. Those cups had a content of 3,5 litres, so one begins to ask oneself suspiciously how the pyramids really should have looked like.

The Egyptians were the Belgians of those days. They already brewed barley beer, corn beer, seasoned beer (e.g. with saffron, ginger and juniper) and wheat beer (“Amenemhet, I’ll have another blanche from Gizeh!”). Their most famous brew was Heget (Zythum in Greek), that played an important role in religious offerings and to which healing power was ascribed, not just in its pure form, but also as a basic ingredient of medication.

The Greeks and the Romans appreciated beer much less. As Asterix the Gaul said “They must be crazy, those Romans”. The Greek Alexander the Great, who founded a city near the Nile and called it “Alexandria” (not really bothered by any form of modesty), used to enjoy more a fine wine. By the way, the Greeks and the Romans called beer “wine from fermented barley”. Yeah right, if you start comparing apples with oranges! It was Pliny the Elder, who lived in the first century A.D., who called beer “cerevisa” (do you recognize that one Spanish word that you know so well?), “an intoxicating liquor made of corn, plunged into water”. He derived the name of the goddess Ceres. If you have some etymological skills, you will recognize the word cereal (as in Cereal Killer, remember). Which reminds me: the first French name for beer was “cervoise”, and in Italian “cervognia”. It wasn’t until later that the French and the Italians started deriving their “bière” and “birra” from the Germanic forms of “beer” (Bier both in German and in Dutch). Which, at their turn, originated in the Latin “biber” (drink, beverage). Only the Spaniards kept uncooperative, even though their verb for drinking (beber) is closest to the Latin word.

Before we go any further: we must give credit where credit is due. According to some sources the Chinese were way ahead of the Mesopotamians some two thousand years B.C., because

they were the first to apply a liquid production method and knew two types of beer: a non-filtered and not completely fermented one and a filtered and fermented one. This is somewhat similar to printing: did Gutenberg invent it or were it the Chinese a couple of thousand years earlier? In the meantime, their revenge is sweet, since they have become the largest beer producing country in the world.

So now we are finally in the right place: with the Celts and the Germans, our main ancestors. According to Julius Caesar – a man who has spoken some very wise words about the Belgians – they immediately had a taste for beer. By the way, the Romans lend our forefathers a helping hand in this. The emperor Domitian, the cad, who at the end of the first century A.D. imposed a reign of terror, ordered his soldiers to destroy all vines in Gaul. So what does a person do? Brewing beer, of course. After the French revolution the same thing happened in what we now call Belgium. But we never learn: in the areas Hageland, Haspengouw, Heuvelland, en some Flemish and Walloon regions, vine growers are producing white wines again.

But anyway, we were in business. Mead was also drunk, but beer flew just as freely from the cow horns. Women's emancipation was not yet what it should have been, so the distribution of tasks between men and women still left somewhat to be desired: women brewed the beer, men drank it.

Beer played such an important religious role with the Germanic Norsemen, that they regularly drank themselves silly and woke up the next morning in America, Greenland, Russia or somewhere in Western-Europe (and – let it be said in passing - being there anyway, they created Normandy for instance, from where they conquered England). Islam and Vikings: même combat, because the looting Normans who died in battle, could drink beer in Walhalla all day long.

Brewing beer stayed essentially domestic until the fifth – sixth century. At that point the abbey beers were created. For the house rules of the Benedictines prescribed e.g. that they should meet their daily needs with manual labor. Pope Gregory the Great, who lived at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh century, made sure that these rules got spread over Italy, England and a century later over the whole of Europe. Monks and lay personnel processed grapes into wine, milk into cheese and bread into beer. Who would dare to suspect those nice monks that they intended to drink themselves into oblivion? No, they just considered beer to be a sort of liquid food that was supposed to lighten the heavy, physical labor. And they were not even wrong, because the presence of the vitamin B-complex in beer is simply beneficial to health (yeah, you over there, in moderation!). Furthermore, in those days of cholera and the plague, some harmful bacteria were killed by the alcohol, acidity and the heating of the flour batter. As a result, it was preferable to drink beer instead of water.

Pending the invention of printing, it were also the monks that copied books by writing in the ninth century. Which gives us a very good idea of the evolution of beer up from that time. The Egyptians already had added dates and other fruit to their beer, and the people of the Middle Ages plentifully experimented with spices (ginger for instance) and juniper. Also with hops, that became fashionable in the eight and the ninth century, without being common in the brewing process, however, because the bitter taste was not appreciated by everyone. The role of hop was mainly to be able to store the beer longer. Brewers that used hops were even punished by the landlords, who saw a source of income being reduced as a result of the loss of taxes they imposed on various spices that were added to beer in those days. Those spices were called “gruit” or “gruut” in Flemish, hence the Gruuthuse Museum in Bruges.

One of the first abbeys that started brewing beer from the very beginning, was the one of the Benedictines of Affligem (near Aalst) in 1083. Nowadays, this tradition is carried on by De