TASTING
BELGIAN BEERS
A beer lovers’ manual
This manual came about with the help of our friend and brewer Dany De Smet.

Dany is a graduated beer expert from Gijzenzele now residing in Melle, Belgium. He graduated in 1992 from the University of Ghent with a “brewing technology” degree and a thesis on ‘fluorescence microscopy of yeast cultures’.

After his studies Dany has worked several years with brewery Huyghe in Melle as a quality manager. Between 1995 and 1999, Dany joined the University of Ghent were he trained students and amateur brewers. Dany taught theoretical courses in ‘Brewery Technology’ and ‘Quality’ and gave practical lab trainings.

Since 1999 Dany created various beer recipes in conjunction with Proef Brewery in Lochristi, Belgium. The project goes under the name of “Slaapmutske” (http://www.slaapmutske.be). The “Slaapmutske” range have won several awards in various countries over the years. Dany is a passionate beer sommelier for Belgibeer as well as a beer architect to many other brewers and beer lovers.
Pouring the beer.

If you are pouring the beer yourself from a bottle, gently run it down the side of the glass. Judge your pour speed based on the head that is forming. Aim to have about a two finger head when you’re done.

Some beers contain visible yeast at the bottom of the bottle that is meant to be drunk with the beer. If this is the case, stop the pour with a bit of beer left in the bottle.

Take a moment to look at the colour and brightness of the beer, then swirl the remaining liquid to lift the yeast sediment and pour it into your glass.

Check again colour before drinking and note any differences from before.

TIP

It is very important to choose the right glass for the beer you are going to taste. If possible, always use the specially designed glassware for the beer you intend to drink. If you don’t have a specific glass, the following rule shall apply: the stronger the alcohol content, the rounder the glass (i.e., similar to a wine glass). Beer glassware should never be washed with chemical detergents as those may influence the taste. Always rinse the glass with clear water and dry it with a clear cotton towel.
**Appearance.**

Note whether the head is dense or thin. Heads are sometimes described as rocky if they are especially dense with dips and peaks forming as some of the bubbles pop.

The color of the head is also worth noting and can range from pure white on Pilsners to light or medium brown on some stouts and porters.

Examine the appearance of the beer itself. Hold the glass up to the light and note the color and whether it is cloudy or clear. A good all-malt (blond) beer should, on average, retain half of its head for a minute leave “Brussels” lace on the side of the glass as the foamy head falls.

**TIP**
A good looking (and tasty) beer will have the bubbles equal in size, creamy and leave a thick almost sticky foam to the clean beer glass.
Aroma.

A beer’s aroma is a very complex and interesting aspect to discover! The aroma is determined by the choice of malts and/or sugars and/or herbs used during the brew as well as the variety of hops, the aromatic components that come from the yeast and the fermentation process.

When tasting a beer note whether it smells primarily of hops or malts. Generally speaking light colored beers will smell more of hops while darker beers tend to have pronounced malt, roasted, chocolate or coffee aroma.

Many ales have a hard to pin down spiciness or fruitiness from their yeasts. Take your time with the aroma. Try to take three good sniffs before your first sip. If you’re taking notes, stop to write your impressions before the first sip distracts you. Be careful to take your time with each sniff as your perception of smell is dulled the more sniffs you odor. Scent also helps deepen the taste and flavor of a beer: NEVER drink beer straight from the bottle pour traditional Belgian beer in your specifically designed ‘Belgibeer’ glass or the brewery’s glassware.
First sip.

When taking your first sip, try to note the initial sensation as the beer enters your mouth. Think about whether it is sweet, bitter or something else. Beer, especially ale, can be very complex. There can be quite a difference between the first taste and the finish. That is why the first sip is always accomplished without swirling the beer in your mouth. Just take the sip and experience what happens in your mouth. Does it taste hoppy, sweet, malty, spicy?.

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Mouthfeel.

This is the texture of the beer or how it physically feels in your mouth. Beer ranges from silky dry stouts, to thick and chewy Scotch ales to thin and fizzy Berliner weisses. This is an important characteristic of a beer.

TIP

If you’d like to discover hop aromatic components intensively, you should know that aromatic hop components chemically concentrate in the beer’s head. So to detect such components you first have to swirl the beer to create some foam, then intensely observe and smell its aroma. Depending on the variety of hops used, you can discover aromas ranging from flowery to spicy or citric!

To observe the aromatic components of the yeast and fermentation process, you may smell the beer while you gently swirl the beer. The beer can be smelled without the foam to discover the fruitiness or spiciness of its body.
Note the lingering flavors after you swallow the drink. Often it can be bitter from the hops or a lingering malty sweetness. Always very interesting to try to follow the evolution of the aroma and the taste while you are drinking the beer. Aromatic components are usually volatile. The way you experience a beer can and will change while your beer warms up and while in contact with the open air. This is a real discovery for the experienced beer taster!

TIP

Do not taste new beers with food or soon after eating. The lingering flavors from food can greatly affect your impression of the brew.

Cleanse your palate with water. Crackers or cheese with our celery salt sprinkled over it are great but you should remember that even these foods can affect the apparent flavors of the beer.

If you’re tasting a number of different beers, let the color be your guide. It is best to taste from light to dark.
A typical Belgian beer.

**Foam**
- Beautiful creamy and stable foam (1 to 2 fingers).
- Stable little bubbles.

**Body**
- Hazy body: unfiltered and unpasteurized beer
- Alcohol percentage of at least 8%
- Perfect balance between hops, yeast and malt
- Multiple fermentation, the last of which is bottlefermented.
- Sediment at the bottom of the glass due to yeast (you can drink: it’s very healthy!)
- Ideal temperature to savour all the beer flavours: between 6°C and 8°C

**Glass**
- Tulip glass: A tulip glass not only helps trap the aroma, but also aids in maintaining large heads, creating a visual and olfactory sensation.
Craft

- Expensive
- Artisanal production
- Large selection of beers, developing different styles often according to season
- Consumer focused on savouring beer: quality
- Complex, for which you have to develop a taste
- High quality ingredients
- Keeping the natural colour, body and flavour of beer: unfiltered and unpasteurized
- Variety based on seasonality of hops and yeast
- Focus on the product
- The emphasis is put on beer itself
- Marketing based on providing a greater diversity of beer styles
- Promotes local economies
**Industrial**

- Cheap
- Mass production
- Small selection of mediocre and tasteless beers
- Consumer focused on mass consumption: quantity
- Easy to drink
- Low/average ingredients: artificial yeast, preservatives, corn used instead of malt, colorants, ...
- As bland a taste and appearance as possible: filtered and pasteurized beers
- Uniform taste throughout the year
- Focus on the brand
- Beer is seen as a cheap accessory: for camping, while watching soccer or football
- Huge marketing campaigns, sometimes targeting children for future consumption
- Protectionism and market saturation in the Food and Beverage industry
History of Belgian beer.

In 1364, Emperor Charles IV enacted the “Novus Modus Fermentandi Cerevisiam” decree, seeking to improve the quality of beer with his ‘new’ brewing method that required brewers to use hops.

In Halle, in Flemish Brabant, a city account from 1559 refers to a mash for brewing ‘lambiek’ beer.

From the 17th century onwards, regional beers were created such as the Antwerp “gerstenbier” (barley beer), “Leuvense witte” (Leuven white beer),

In Germany, the “Reinheitsgebot” (1516) stated that beer could be brewed exclusively from barley, hops and water.
The end of the 18th century marked the end of the abbeys’ privileges, when, in 1783, Emperor Joseph II dissolved the abbeys because they infringed upon the breweries, and several abbeys and their breweries were destroyed during the French Revolution.

The 19th century marked a new chapter in beer history with the breakthrough of the Czech pilsner (1839) - it 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 when the German occupying forces seized the copper vats, equipment and their vehicles. Only half of the nearly 3,200 breweries survived. Then 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 effects of Second World War. In 1946 only 775 breweries remained.

Inspired by the Flower Power movement of the late 1960s, Belgian speciality beers were rediscovered and, in 1977, the British beer guru Michael Jackson (1942-2007) finally put Belgian beer culture in the spotlight.

Since the turn of the century the interest in authentic speciality beers has continued to grow and the Belgian beer industry now includes some of the best known and popular brands. In addition, Trappist beers are becoming increasingly exclusive because of the limited quantities produced by the monasteries, and also popular are the distinctive specialty beers of local and family-owned breweries. This trend first became apparent for lambic beers, but is now spreading to include Flemish red-brown beers, brown beers, and strong blonde, well-hopped beer.
**Belgian Beer Styles**

1. Bottom fermented beer

Bottom-fermented beers are the most widely distributed. ‘Bottom-fermented’ refers to lower temperatures (between 5° and 10 °C / 41° and 50°F) at which fermentation takes place and the type of yeast, which sinks to the bottom of the tank after several days.

**PILS**: a golden, clear beer with a softly bitter taste. Often used as thirst quencher because of its fresh hoppyness and low alcohol (e.g. Stella Artois, Primus, Romy, Bavik, Vedett, …).

2. Top fermented beer

Top fermenting yeast is typically used for most specialty beers. The fermentation takes place at higher temperatures (between 15° and 25 °C / 59° and 77 °F) and towards the end of the process, the yeast cells float on the surface. The yeast culture used will add a slightly fruity and/or spicy touch.

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

**Triple** (7 - 9 vol.%) is often a relatively strong, golden beer with a malty to slightly sweet taste, sometimes with spices (e.g. Westmalle, Karmeliet, Brugse Tripel, etc.).

**Witbier** (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. This old beer type was rediscovered and brewed again in 1966 by Pierre Celis. (e.g. Hoegaarden, Vedett White, Mater, …).

**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. Straffe Hendrik, Sezoens, …).

**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.).

**Amber Beers** are brewed with a mixture of pale and amber malts. (e.g. Ramée Amber, Gouden Carolus Ambrio, …).

**Brown or dark beers** (4 - 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.
**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.)

**Barley wine** (9,5 vol.% and more) is a strong, alcoholic variety of blonde, amber or dark beer. (e.g. Piraat, Gulden Draak, …)

**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’).

**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. (e.g. Scotch Silly, McChouffe, …)

**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. (e.g. Saison Dupont, Saison 1900, …)

**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. (e.g. Viven Imperial IPA, Troubadour Magma, Hopverdomme, …).
3. Spontaneous Fermentation Beer

In spontaneous fermentation the brewer does not inoculate the hopped, lambic wort with a yeast culture. Instead, the hopped wort is exposed to the cool outside air, which results in spontaneous fermentation. Although these beers can theoretically be brewed anywhere, the most suitable microflora are found in the air to the south west of Brussels, in the region known as the ‘Zennevallei’ and ‘Pajottenland’.

**Lambiek** *(Lambic, 5 - 6 vol.%) 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.

**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.

4. Beers of mixed fermentation

Various yeast cultures are used for beers of mixed fermentation. Usually the parent brew is a top-fermenting beer and a part of this is stored in oak barrels for one and a half years or longer. A lactic acid fermentation process takes place during this time and this beer is then mixed with young, high fermentation beer.
Versnijbier (Blended beer, 6 - 8 vol.%) 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, Vicaris 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.

Vlaams Roodbruin (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 citrussy note (e.g. Rodenbach, Duchesse de Bourgogne, Vander Ghinste Oud Bruin, etc.).

‘Oud Bruin’ (Flemish Sour Ale) is a collective noun for Flemish Brown and Flemish red-brown beers.

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5. Belgian Trappist & Abbey beer

These are not really Belgian beer styles as such, but more collective denominators for beers having a link to a religious order and complying with some defined conditions. The beers might be of every beer style you could imagine, however most of them decline in 3 versions, a blond, a dark (double) and a triple.

Trappist (www.trappist.be) is the name of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, also known as the Trappist Order. The order takes its name from La Trappe Abbey, located in the French province of Normandy. It is a Roman Catholic religious order of cloistered contemplative monastics who strictly follow the Rule of St. Benedict. Many of the rules have been relaxed since they were written in the 6th century. However, a fundamental tenet, that monasteries should be self-supporting, is still maintained by these groups. Following this rule, most Trappist monasteries produce a wide range of goods that are sold to provide income for the monastery. They are probably most famous for their beers, which are unique within the beer world.
There are eleven Trappist breweries in the world from which six in Belgium: Westmalle, Westvleteren, Achel, Chimay, Orval and Rochefort. Their beers are easy to recognize thanks to the hexagonal logo of an Authentic Trappist Product (www.trappist.be), which means that the beer was brewed within or in the close vicinity of the walls of a Trappist monastery under supervision of the trappist monks.

The brewery must be of secondary importance within the monastery and there should be no intention to make profit. Margins are in this philosophy less important and the trappist monks have less pressure to reduce costs. They have no problem to use the best, more expensive ingredients, guarantee for a product of top quality. The main goal is to cover the expenses of the trappist monks, and what remains should be donated to charity. Drinking a Trappist beer is therefore always a bit charity (beside the pleasure it offers).

The Trappist association has a legal standing, and its logo gives the consumer some information and guarantees about the product. The name does not infer anything about the beer type.

The high concentration of Trappist beers in Belgium is an important part of the specificity of the Belgian beer culture.

Abbey beer is also 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. The beer doesn't have to be brewed in or in the neighborhood of the abbey but there has to be a demonstrable, historical connection with the abbey site the beer refers to. Further on the brewery has to pay royalties to the abbey and the abbey may also check the marketing strategy and publicity material.

In order to guarantee the name is not misused for marketing purposes, the 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 the beers have to comply with a minimum of conditions. It’s a Belgian label and only applies to Belgian beer.

Good to know is that every Trappist beer also is an Abbey beer as the conditions to wear the Authentic Trappist Product logo are stricter than the ones for an Abbey beer. The other way on isn’t through as Abbey
beers do not have to be brewed close to an active monastery. Even though drinking an Abbey beer is also bit of a good action as the royalties paid by the brewery go to cultural and/or charitable activities.

**Double and Triple** are terms that originate from a custom in the Middle Ages. The normal (ordinary) beer was named ‘single’ and was drunk by the ordinary laborers and monks. This beer was good enough for them, but people with more esteem and money wanted a better product. To fulfil the desire of those rich customers the brewers made heavier beer (using more malt).

Transporters and bar owners were often not able to read in that period. The brewer therefor marked his barrels with (chalk) crosses. One cross on ordinary barrels, two on barrels with heavier beer (dubbel beer) and three on the heaviest stuff (tripel beer).

The terms single, dubbel (double) and tripel (triple) have nothing to do with the yeasting or maturation process of the beer, as often is presumed. It refers to the amount of raw materials (malt and cereals) used. The more material, the heavier the beer. A double is heavier than a single but it hasn’t to be twice as heavy neither that twice the quantity of raw material is used.

Actually the term ‘single’ is in disuse but some breweries use the term ‘extra’ instead to denominate their light, thirst quenching beer. In addition a couple of brewers also launched some ‘quadruples’, with even more alcohol.

Nowadays we usually associate a dubbel with a dark beer and a tripel with a blonde beer, but this isn’t a must. Most brewers do follow this ‘color code’ but a few ones do not care. Similar a quadruple beer is usually a dark beer.
Main ingredients of Belgian Beer

The water that is used for beer, has to comply with many requirements. As the water must be pure, it is often purified, cooked and controlled in the brewery itself. Special mineral waters are often used. Major international brewers produce beer at multiple locations, resulting in the use of different water sources.

The lager sold under the same name can thus vary by country. In order to be able to guarantee quality consistency, demineralised water is first produced with most brewing of any water. Then minerals are added, resulting in the availability of reproducible brewing water is available.

Barley is the seed of the barley plant, it is a grain that is similar to wheat in appearance. It is harvested mostly in the United States and in Europe. Specific types of barley are used in the production of different types of beers, each strain imparts a unique characteristic taste and body that is suited for different beers.

Malted barley is barley that has been allowed to germinate (sprout) to a degree and is then dried. This is accomplished industrially by increasing the water content of the seed to 40-45% by soaking it for a period close to 40 hours. The seed is then drained and held at a constant temperature (60 F / 15.5 °C) for close to 5 days until it starts to sprout.
Hops (*Humulus lupulus*) are a natural preservative and part of the early use of hops in beer was to preserve it. Hops were added directly to the cask after fermentation to keep it fresh while it was transported. This is how one particular style of beer, India Pale Ale, was developed. At the turn of the 18th century, British brewers began shipping strong ale with lots of hops added to the barrels to preserve it over the several month voyage to India.

The bitterness contributed by hops balances the sweetness of the malt sugars and provides a refreshing finish. The main bittering agent is the alpha acid resin which is insoluble in water until isomerized by boiling.

Yeast are single-celled microorganisms that reproduce by budding. They are biologically classified as fungi and are responsible for converting fermentable sugars into alcohol and other byproducts.

There are literally hundreds of varieties and strains of yeast. In the past, there were two types of beer yeast: ale yeast (the “top-fermenting” type, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) and lager yeast (the “bottom-fermenting” type, *Saccharomyces uvarum*, formerly known as *Saccharomyces carlsbergensis*). Today, as a result of recent reclassification of Saccharomyces species, both ale and lager yeast strains are considered to be members of *S. cerevisiae*. 
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