



BELGIUM BEER TRAIL #1

by Jerry Soverinsky | Photos by JORIS LUYTEN

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Photo: JORIS LUYTEN

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By Jerry Soverinsky

Despite culturally rich cities and towns, more than 100 Michelin-starred restaurants, and an important military battle history, it took relaxed beer exportation laws for Belgium to finally gain the attention of Americans. "This is beer?" they were overheard saying after sampling Chimay Blue for the first time, curious why it lacked the bitter ginger ale taste characteristic of [Insert large batch American beer brand here. Any brand.].

This is not an unpatriotic rant, just an objective assessment that Belgium beer is simply...otherworldly. *Magnifique*, as the French-speaking Walloons in the south of Belgium say. *Smakelijk*, as their Flemish-speaking neighbors to the north muse.

It's a product that has taken hundreds of years to perfect.

As early as the 3rd and 4th centuries — before Belgium was Belgium — the Belgae (as the Romans called them) were brewing beer, aided by a cool climate that provided an especially fertile environment for growing barley.

The practice spread throughout the region, and today, breweries can be found in more than 100 Belgian cities and towns. This makes a visit to Belgium an easy way to nourish one's affection for beer while incorporating stops at the country's major visitor attractions.

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Day 2: Brugges

Poperings Hommel

A relative newbie when it comes to Belgian beer, Poperings Hommel was launched in 1981 as a celebratory beer for a hops festival in Poperinge, a town in southwest West Flanders. The beer's golden-bronze hue underscores its crisp, somewhat bitter flavor profile, the result of a high hops content, which is highlighted by citrus and honeysuckle notes.

Despite its young age, Poperings Hommel is the most popular of more than a dozen beers produced by Brouwerij Van Eecke in Watou, whose brewing history dates to the early 17th century.

To request a tour, contact the brewery directly: +32 057 38 80 30; info@brouwerijvaneecke.be; www.hommelbier.be.

After dark: Spend the remainder of the day and night in Brugges, the "Venice of the North" whose intricate canals, cobblestone streets, and two medieval squares (Markt and Burg) are sightseeing priorities for any Belgium visit.

Day 3: Antwerp

De Koninck

Just as an Englishman's request for a "pint" would be greeted by a congenial pull of the tap from a U.K. barkeep, a Belgian's appeal for a "*bolleke*" at a local bar would be met by equally reflexive behavior, though instead of free pouring a stout or porter, the Belgian barman would retrieve De Koninck, the signature ale from Antwerp, and its trademark glass.

With a history dating to 1833, De Koninck is served in a rounded glass or *bolleke* ("little ball," translated from the Flemish), offering hints of spice and cinnamon in a perfectly balanced dry ale.

The beer is made from malt only — no maize or brewing sugars — spending more than a week fermenting. De Koninck brewery provides its surplus yeast to a local café across the street (Café Pelgrim), which serves it in shot glasses to those truly invested in the beer process.

Tours of the brewery are offered weekdays and Saturdays: +32 03 218 40 48; info@dekoninck.com; www.dekoninck.be. The brewery is undergoing renovations through October 2014, which may disrupt tour availability.

After dark: Antwerp and its medieval town center offer a bevy of sightseeing options for visitors, many focused around its Grote Markt (central square).

Day 4: Brussels

Cantillon

For more than a century, the Van Roy-Cantillon family has been brewing the traditional Brussels Gueuze beer (among others) from its intimate brewery in Belgium's capital city.

Blending a variety of Lambics of different ages, Cantillon Gueuze 100% Lambic is a spontaneous fermentation beer that carries both a sour and modestly bitter taste. Produced in oak barrels, its bottles are capped with a cork and aged in a cellar for at least a year, during which they undergo a second fermentation. The deliberate process unearths a sparkling, refreshing flavor, with every blending yielding a distinct taste.

While Gueuze 100% Lambic is Cantillon's most popular beer, the brewery produces a number of other varieties. And respecting its long history of producing traditional Belgian beers, the family reverted to its roots in 1999, when it began using only organically grown grain in all of its beer, part of its commitment to using "only the best raw materials."

Don't be fooled by the beers' organic moniker, though, which for many products means a short-changing of flavor. Cantillon's beers are distinctive, full flavored beers that are appreciated by beer connoisseurs the world over.

Tours are available daily except Sunday. +32 02 521 49 28; info@cantillon.be; www.cantillon.be.

After dark: Be sure to save time for Brussels sightseeing, which is highlighted by museums, shops, restaurants, and parks.

Day 5: Han sur Lesse

Rochefort

For a classic Trappist beer, head to Wallonia and Notre Dame de Saint-Remy, which produces the popular Rochefort beer.

The Rochefort collection, with their helpful 6, 8 and 10 alcohol content-designations (i.e. Trappistes Rochefort 6, Trappistes Rochefort 8, etc.), is characterized by rich, fruity flavor and a hint of chocolate.

As with all Trappist beers (there are less than 10 in the world), monks handle the brewing process, which for Rochefort takes place within a monastery. As such, there are no formal tours of the brewery available, though the abbey church is open to the public, and cafés throughout the area proudly serve their beers.

I prefer to sample mine in the nearby town of Han sur Lesse, home to the Grottes de Han, a network of immense, subterranean caves and their remarkable collection of stalagmites and other concretions.

To visit the abbey: +32 084 22 01 40; <http://www.abbaye-rochefort.be/>.

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Proost! (while you're in Flanders in Belgium's north). And *À votre santé!* (while traveling in Wallonia in the country's south).

Itinerary:

Day 1: Ghent

Delirium Tremens

With its self-deprecatory reference (literally, the name is a pathological term referring to the withdrawal syndrome experienced by alcoholics), Delirium Tremens — or D.T., for those in the know — has become somewhat of a staple for any American beer café striving for relevance. With D.T.'s iconic pink elephant logo whimsically adorning each label, the beer's fruity bouquet is the result of a fermentation that incorporates three distinct yeast cultures.

The end result is a mature, somewhat spicy finish anchored by an 8.5% ABV (alcohol by volume). It's one of more than a dozen beers produced by the Huyghe Brewer in Melle, which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2006. Tours are offered weekdays with advanced reservations required: +32 09 252 15 01; visit@delirium.be; www.delirium.be.

Rodenbach

Nearly 200 years ago in the West Flanders port town of Roeselare, the four Rodenbach brothers invested in a small brewery. While they would go on to make sizable non-beer contributions during their lifetime (Constantin would become ambassador to Greece and is buried in front of the Parthenon; Alexander, who was blinded during his youth, was a politician, poet and author; and Ferdinand and Pedro both played a role in the Belgian Revolution in 1830), their legacy is best known by the beer they established, which carries their surname.

Rodenbach has come to define the Flemish red beer, whose burgundy tint is the result of tannins and caramels embedded in oak casks, which contribute to a deep, complex flavor profile.

The namesake Rodenbach beer is a tart, refreshing red beer with a mild (by Belgian standards) 5.2% ABV, while Rodenbach Grand Cru has been compared to a vintage wine, the result of an extended maturation process that includes two stages of fermentation.

Tours of the Rodenbach brewery include a visit to its maturation halls, whose 294 oak vats are housed in an archaeologically protected site. +32 (052) 31 74 14; visit.rodenbach@palmbreweries.com; www.palmbreweries.com.

After dark: Spend the night in Ghent, a university town whose car-free town center harmoniously incorporates its important medieval past with its bustling cosmopolitan present.