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Holy Beer: Belgium's authentic trappist beers

Jerry Soverinsky, Special to USA TODAY 5:03 p.m. EDT October 7, 2013



(Photo: Jean-Paul Remy, courtesy Belgian Tourist Office Brussels Wallonia)

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Belgian beer, despite its high alcohol content, provides one with remarkable clarity, especially after 40-something years of bachelorhood, when a blind date matches you Chimay for Chimay at a Chicago beer café.

And so it was six hours and five beers (apiece) later several years ago on a snowy, February night: I had met my future wife. I suspect mine was not the only relationship nurtured at the bustling café and its selection of 300+ Belgian beers.

Over the past several years, with dozens of Belgian beers making their way to store shelves and beer cafés in the U.S., Americans have discovered that Belgians do beer right. The variety -- fruit beers, white beers, Trappist beers and more -- is extensive, each with a distinct taste and profile.

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

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Many Belgian monks, to sustain a life of prayer and work and remain self-sufficient, farm and brew beer, consuming what they need while often selling the surplus to the public. The name "Trappist beer" is legally protected and applies to those beers brewed by Trappist monks in a monastery. The Belgian Trappist breweries include Achel, Chimay, Orval, Rochefort, and Westmalle (there is a sixth — Westvleteren — though its beers are not distributed).

Look for the brown and white "Authentic Trappist Product" logo to ensure you're sampling the real thing.

Achel

Just south of the Dutch border in the town of Hamont Achel sits the Abbey of St. Benedict, where monks, along with farming and cattle breeding, began brewing beer in 1845. Today, the monastery's Achelse Kluis brewery produces six beers, including blonds, browns, and a particularly potent 9.5% ABV (alcohol by volume) Achel Trappist Extra. Most of the beers are characterized by a crisp, if bitter, malt flavor profile.

While the brewery doesn't provide individual visits, inquire about privately guided group tours. You can sample the beer at the onsite bar which also serves snacks.

+32 040 2069955; achelsekluis.org

Chimay

Founded in the mid 19th century and located in a tranquil setting in the Ardennes, the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Scourmont began brewing beer just 12 years later. The monastery has taken particular pride in its offerings, and became the first to adopt the "Trappist Beer" moniker in the early part of the 20th century.

Available today in Chimay Red ("Premiere"), Chimay Triple ("Cinq Cents"), and Chimay Blue ("Grande Reserve"), the beers offer distinctively light, slightly fruity aromas, ideal for savoring with a hearty bowl of mussels or platter of *frites* (French fries).



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Tours that detail the history of Chimay beers and cheeses are available at Espace Chimay, a short drive from the Abbey.

+32 060 21 14 33; espacechimay.com

Orval

Despite its relatively young Trappist beer age of 82 years, Orval, located within the Abbey of Notre Dame D'Orval, is one of the more popular Belgian exports. The beer advocate labels Orval both "delicate and subtle," and the late beer journalist and author, Michael Jackson, calls the brew "quintessential beer." The beer's complex flavor profile evolves over time, beginning light and crisp soon after brewing, and taking on a lemony tone after several months.

Visits are available during the brewery's annual open house; at other times by private arrangement.

+32 061 311 261; www.orval.be

Rochefort

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

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

As with all Trappist beer (there are seven in the world), monks handle the brewing process, which for Rochefort takes place within a monastery. Although there are no formal tours of the brewery, the abbey church is open to the public and cafés throughout the area proudly serve Rochefort beers. Not only does the nearby town of Han sur Lesse, feature the beers, the town is also home to the Grottes de Han, a network of immense, subterranean caves with a remarkable collection of stalagmites and other concretions.

To visit the abbey: +32 084 22 01 40; abbaye-rochefort.be



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Westmalle

In the same years of its founding — 1836 — a small monastery northeast of Antwerp became a Trappist abbey and began construction of a small brewery.

Westmalle Abbey began perfecting its craft, and nearly 180 years later, Westmalle Abbey still uses the same ingredients — water, malt, hops, sugar and yeast — in producing its Westmalle Tripel, Dubbel, and Extra varieties (the Extra is in limited production and for internal consumption by the abbey's monks).

While visitors are not allowed within the monastery, home to the brewery, opposite the abbey is Café Trappisten, which offers an informational film about the monastery and the brewery. Reservations are recommended.

+32 03 312 05 02; trappistwestmalle.be

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