

The History of Belgian Beer

from the Global Beer Network

Julius Caesar wrote more than 2000 years ago that the "Belgae" were the bravest under the Gauls. He defeated them, so he must have been braver. Although beer was the beverage of choice for the common people in the Roman Empire, Julius was surprised to learn that those Gauls were drinking such high quantities of a more potent version. During 400 years the influence of the Roman-culture was so strong that not only the wine-making made its way up to the North but also the Celtic languages of the Gauls were gradually replaced by a "Roman" language which is the origin of French. In the next centuries, for more than 1000 years, when the average temperatures were higher than today, wine was also cultivated in what is now Belgium.

In several of the Belgian Beers, you still can enjoy the influence of the wine-making: the spontaneous fermented lambics (Cherish), the aging in wine-casks (Petrus Oud Bruin), the refermentation in the bottles (Piraat, Sara, Hommel Ale) and the brewing styles of the Catholic Abbeys (Augustijn, Bornem)

About 400 years after Julius Caesar, a mass-movement of tribes from the East, the Germans, moved into Western Europe and defeated, chased and absorbed the Gauls. (In the 20th century they came back twice but stayed only for a couple of years. Now, they come once a year, not all together and stay only for a week in the Belgian tourist spots.) The Germans moved west because they became under pressure on their Eastern borders by Asian tribes like the one of Attila The Hun and many others. These Asian warlords were stopped in 451 on the plains of France and chased from Western Europe by a coalition of the German tribes and what was left of the Roman Empire. These Asian tribes continued to rule the Russian mainland for centuries.

The German Culture and the Roman culture influenced each other but one never replaced the other. Instead a language frontier and even a cultural frontier emerged between the Roman-speaking tribes and the German-speaking tribes. This frontier divides modern Belgium right in the middle, stretches farther over Luxembourg, the Elzas (France), Switzerland ... The Germans brought their grains and brewing techniques with them like the wheat-style beers (Wittekerke).

In the next centuries, the Low Lands (common name for what is now Belgium and the Netherlands), were

sometimes independent and very prosperous, sometimes ruled and plundered by all surrounding nations: Vikings, France, Austria, Spain, Germany ... The good result, brought by these foreign invaders, is that the Belgians disrespect authority. It goes that far, that the Belgians voted in recent general elections for corrupt politicians, who never tell the truth and who always raise taxes. Who cares? Everybody cheats on taxes. The best part is: the higher the taxes, the higher the national debt. An absolute world-record: 140 % of the GDP. The good news for us, beer-lovers, is: no law tells a Belgian brewer how to brew his beer. This is one of the reasons why Belgians enjoy the widest selection of different beer-styles in the world. Other nations, like the Germans, have a large selection of excellent beers, but most of these beers are Pilsner-style beers.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth century Flanders and Wallonia, the two States of modern Belgium, were very prosperous. Cities like Brugge, Ghent, Antwerpen, Brussel, Tournai and Liege were cultural and political centers of the world. All these cities were involved with international trade with the rest of Europe and the Middle East. They were all at the top of technology and craftsmanship. You can compare their wealth with the splendor and good fortune, at the same time, of the Italian cities (Venice, Padua, Torino) and the Scandinavian cities (Kopenhagen, Stockholm) and Northern German cities (Bremen, Hamburg, Dantzig) along the coast of the Baltic sea.

Brugge (Bruges) was called the "Venice of the North" because of all its canals, where ships from all over Europe traded their merchandise. The Oldest known Stock-Exchange of the world can still be visited in the center of Brugge. In fact, the word "bourse", another word for stock-exchange, comes from the Flemish word "beurs". The houses and cathedrals built in that era, and the artwork of the Flemish painters Bruegel, Memlinck, Rubens, Van Dijck and many others are still the witnesses of the power and the richness of Flanders. Examples of these paintings can be admired in all major museums of the world. They are catalogued as "Flemish Primitives". A strange name when you see the picture-like details of these paintings.

Thanks to the international trade and the craftsmanship, the ideal circumstances (oppression, poverty, sickness ...) for the people to take a new chance and migrate to new discovered territories like the Americas. And, these immigrants brought of course their beer to the new world!

We now have learned among other facts, how the Romans invented the name Belgium, but that we had to wait 2,000 years before the country was actually founded. In a few years from now we may see the country disappear again. For sure, the name Belgian Beer will remain, even without the country, because it is a quality label for the widest style-selection of exciting and exceptional beers, full of taste, aroma and history. We have seen how after the Romans, the Germans and the Vikings influenced the Low Lands (common name for what is now Belgium and the Netherlands) and their brewing techniques. Even today the Germans and the Scandinavians are known as fabulous beer-lovers, who can drink all night. Did you know that Walhalla, heaven for the Vikings, was a place where beer was served non-stop, for free and served by beautiful blond women. The closest thing to heaven for the Vikings must have been Flanders, where we have an abundance of beer and many beautiful blond women. No wonder that the Germans, who came in the 4th century, stayed for ever and that the Vikings stayed for two centuries. Later in the second millennium, from the South, France and Spain came to rule this heavenly country. They brought their wine-making techniques, but didn't find any grapes. So they influenced the "Belgian" brewing techniques, and adopted brewing techniques in their own wine-making.

All these foreign influences, and the fact that Flanders and Wallonia, the two Belgian States, were very prosperous, combined with the local sense for the good life (heaven) and a complete disrespect for authority (once you're in heaven, nobody cares about the boss), created the basis for the wide variety of delicious beers we find now in Belgium.

Why and how has one created Belgium? For political reasons and the profit of a few, of course. The Low Lands and its people have been split by Spain during the 16th century in the religious wars.

The Protestants, who were the rich and intellectuals, went North and created Holland. The poor, the "intellectual-disabled" and those without choice, continued to be Roman Catholics and were occupied by Spain, by Austria and by France. The South reunited with the North only after the defeat of Napoleon, the French dictator and imperialist, who brought war and misery all over Europe.

In 1830, Belgium was created by France, who sponsored a secession-revolution of a few rich liberal industrialists in Wallonia and Brussels. Holland had its mind on the colonies, and wasn't so happy with all

these sinful Catholics in the South, and didn't really fight hard to keep its new Southern Provinces. England liked the idea to cripple Holland, and recognized immediately the new country. Queen Victoria's father shipped a German Prince, who was a danger for the women living at his Court, to become King of Belgium. He didn't even speak one word of the language of the majority of his people. Worse, the Flemings had to wait five royal-generations, before they had a king who could make himself clear in their language. Still worse, the present queen can only smile in Dutch! You know, the Belgian nobility speaks French and spit on the language of the Flemings.

Holland was the loser in this rebellion. Holland was one of the richest and most powerful seafaring nations in the 17th, 18th and 19th century, with colonies all over the world. If they had played the game right and had sent more people, the whole USA would now speak Dutch, since they were the first to install colonies at the American East Coast. They bought Manhattan from the natives. Holland was a threat to England, Spain and France, so everybody liked the idea to split up a dangerous competitor. So, all of sudden, a new nation was born, and it must be said that this new nation, Belgium, was very dynamic and modern. A beacon of freedom in Western Europe, and intellectual exiles from France, Germany and other countries came to Belgium. Like most new things, in the beginning everybody is working in the same directions, is full of enthusiasm and self-esteem.

For the common people and the brewers, nothing really changed. They had to pay taxes to new rulers but that was about it. Over four centuries they were used to be ruled by people, who didn't speak their language, so they didn't really care. Everybody does his job and leaves the other alone. That is how they survived for centuries. In the 19th century, every village had at least one brewery and most cities had plenty of brewers. Every street had at least one pub, and in some villages almost everybody owned a pub. No TV, no movies, no electricity, what else could you do than going from neighbor to neighbor to have a few drinks? At least the community communication was well organized. The brewers, who were in most cases also large farmers, were the richest people of the country-side and became in many cases the mayor of the village. The political parties were locally organized around the brewer. Election time was the most exciting period of the year, since every brewer, candidate-mayor, went from pub to pub to give free beer. No wonder that the actual Belgian politicians

are known in the international business world as some of the most corrupt of the world, I hear you whisper. What can you do? Belgium is not a democracy.

And that is the sad truth. Belgium is at the end of its existence, and all politicians know that, so they try to steal as much as possible in the last remaining years. Why else do you think that in the last twelve years they built a national debt of more than 130 % of the GNP, a world-record in the Western World? The two peoples living in this country are so different in nature and culture that they both want their freedom. Now that we see the emergence of Europe as a new decision-level, Europe becomes the greatest power in the dissolving process of Belgium. The decision-level of Belgium becomes obsolete and very costly to maintain. It has no economic sense anymore. The political power shifts away from Belgium: on one hand to Europe and on the other hand to its two states: Flanders and Wallonia. The only things that still hold Belgium together are a king (the last one in Europe with real political powers), and a soccer team. The soccer team had its best years in the 1970's and 1980's, and the king, well ... let's not get into that.

But, dear friends, beer-lovers, all of this doesn't affect the quality of the Belgian beers. These beers have been around for more centuries than Belgium has, and they will be here to enjoy for many, many more centuries - with or without Belgium, Cheers.