

# THE REINHEITSGEBOT or GERMANY'S PURITY LAW

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"We hereby proclaim and decree, by Authority of our Province, that henceforth in the Duchy of Bavaria, in the country as well as in the cities and marketplaces, the following rules apply to the sale of beer:

"From Michaelmas to Georgi, the price for one Mass [Bavarian Liter 1,069] or one Kopf [bowl-shaped container for fluids, not quite one Mass], is not to exceed one Pfennig Munich value, and

"From Georgi to Michaelmas, the Mass shall not be sold for more than two Pfennig of the same value, the Kopf not more than three Heller [Heller usually one-half Pfennig].

"If this not be adhered to, the punishment stated below shall be administered.

"Should any person brew, or otherwise have, other beer than March beer, it is not to be sold any higher than one Pfennig per Mass.

"Furthermore, we wish to emphasize that in future in all cities, markets and in the country, the only ingredients used for the brewing of beer must be Barley, Hops and Water. Whosoever knowingly disregards or transgresses upon this ordinance shall be punished by the Court authorities' confiscating such barrels of beer, without fail.

"Should, however, an innkeeper in the country, city or markets buy two or three pails of beer (containing 60 Mass) and sell it again to the common peasantry, he alone shall be permitted to charge one Heller more for the Mass or the Kopf, than mentioned above.

"Furthermore, should there arise a scarcity and subsequent price increase of the barley (also considering that the times of harvest differ, due to location), WE, the Bavarian Duchy, shall have the right to order curtailments for the good of all concerned."

September 29<sup>th</sup> - Michaelmas is the festival day of St. Michael the archangel.

April 23<sup>rd</sup> - Georgi is the festival day of St. George the dragon slayer.

At first glance and according to common lore, this decree was made in 1516 as a "Consumer Protection Law" to protect the public from adulterated ingredients, unsafe brewing practices, and the tendency of some retailers toward price gouging. In addition, the law was designed to eliminate competition for grain between brewers and bakers. Wheat and rye were more suited to baking while barley was better suited to brewing. Of course, the Duchy retained authority to license the privilege to brew with these other grains.

Brewers were putting all sorts of things in their beer. Hops were well known but cost a lot more than herbs which could be gathered along a fence row or from the forest floor. The declining quality of beer translated into declining sales. Declining sales meant dwindling taxes to be collected. As the contents of the coffers of the city and aristocracy diminished, something had to be done to reverse this financially devastating trend. The civil authorities and nobility were suddenly interested in preserving public health. "Follow the money" is an admonition which seems timeless. When the decree is weighed against the reality of the times, the focus seems to deviate away from consumer protection.

Over the years, there were many such regulations which affected only particular cities, but this was the first which covered all of Bavaria. When Germany was unified in 1871, the Reinheitsgebot was still only a Bavarian thing but was adopted by a few other German states. It wasn't enforced as a national code until 1906 when yeast was officially added to the list of ingredients. The purity portion of the Reinheitsgebot was retained in the Beer Taxation Law or Biersteuergesetz. It was updated in 1952 and prevailed until 1987 when the barley-hops-water-yeast only requirement was struck down in court as an impediment to free trade. This only affected beers imported into Germany.

Another change was made after Germany became a member of the European Union. The Biergesetz of 1993 allows even sugar in German-brewed top fermenting beer. Lagers brewed in Germany are required to abide by the original decree.

Although there is anecdotal evidence of German brewers, even Bavarian brewers using "verboten" ingredients over the years, most German brewers still adhere to that provision of the Reinheitsgebot as a matter of tradition and National pride.