

50 SHADES OF BEER

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“Beer makes you feel the way you ought to feel without a beer”

- Henry Lawson



A LITTLE WORD AHEAD

Beer: For some of us a passion and for a minority a nightmare, but for most of us, a pleasure that doesn't know its boundaries. The Belgian beer is a wonderful product, which has found its way throughout the whole world.

It is not only a *product*, but also an *ingredient* on itself. It's the ingredient that binds us together. It is a reason to meet each other and it's a product where some people give lyrical descriptions about, how to drink it. Beer also determines the places where one meets and with whom. The Belgian golden liquid sometimes determines your statements, your influence on others, and unintentionally turns a smile on your face. This phenomenon is accelerated by increasing the amount of beer which sometimes leads to hilarious situations.

Where does this phenomenon come from? And why in Belgium?

In earlier times, it was the women who were brewing. So, they were called *brewsters*. The men started taking over in the 19th century and started commercializing it. It was one of the household tasks in the family. The children also drank beer, although with a very low alcohol content. Throughout the Middle Ages, it became a drink of the people. The nobles determined their separation in social status by drinking wine. That was also in Roman times. They thought this liquid they called *'Mead'* was a drink for the ordinary people. Beer at that time was affiliated to women: it was *wet and cold*. Wine on the other hand, was male: *hot and dry*. Thus, that was the way the Greeks and Romans in any case thought so.

The phenomenon *'beer'* was discovered accidentally in Iraq, at that time Mesopotamia, 8,000 years ago. Barley was baked, water added until they obtained a sort of a porridge and spontaneous fermentation gave an alcoholic flavor to it. Beware, certainly not to compare to the beers we know today. The name *'beer'* comes from the word *'beor'* in old English, which came from the Proto-Germanic word: *beuzą*. That word came from the Proto-Indo-European word: *bensom*, which means brewer's yeast.

Malt? How do they make it?

Barley is soaked in water to increase the volume of moisture. The grain will be germinating after 4 or 5 days and at that point the process will be stopped. This is how we make malt. If we don't do that, we will have a plant and that is not the purpose, we are not bakers. The enzymes in the grains contains sugars which we need to turn into alcohol during the production. These malts are made in Belgium by specialized companies and we have 6 of them. In the old days the brewers did this themselves but because of the high production they didn't do it anymore.

Today, they buy it of course at these companies. Germinated barley will be dried at a temperature of 90 degrees Celsius. To get an amber-colored beer they dry it at 110 C. The dark malts, which we call *caramel-malts*, are dried at 150 C. When the grain is dried at a temperature of 200 C, we get the really black malts where they can make beers like Guinness and Stouts. So, the color of the malt determines the color of your beer. Did you know that all dark beers are made with pale malt? They add 10% caramel malt to it and we get a dark beer. When we add 2% caramel malts to the pale malt, we get an amber colored beer.

How is beer brewed? A short explanation...

The formula is quite simple. What we need are the 4 ingredients: water, malt, hops and yeast. Of course, the barley is the most important grain, but also wheat and oats. To extract sugars there is also the use of corn and rice. Anyway, all the grains that have servants and what grows on a field, you can use in our little brew world. The yeasts will convert the sugars into alcohol and carbonic acid.

At first, the malts are milled in a milling machine and they end up in the first kettle. We add water to it and make sure the Ph value is 5. We heat up the water with the grains at a temperature of 55 C for 20 minutes. Then we go up in stages to 65 C for 30 minutes, 72 C for 20 minutes and at we stop at the end to a temperature of 78 C. We drain the kettle with the whole substance and it's pressed through the filter. The grains stay behind and are collected by the farmers to add to the food for the animals. It still contains proteins. So, we have some happy cows and pigs.

In the big boiling kettle, we obtain sugar-water. We boil this at 100 C and add the bitter hops to it. We do this for at least an hour. At the end of the boiling process other ingredients like spices and fruits will be added for the taste and aroma. The batter is filtered and disappears in yeasting-tanks where they add the yeast to it. The yeast will turn the sugars into alcohol and carbonic acid. This takes

about 6 or 7 days to do. This is a short explanation how beers are born. After this fermentation, we put the beer to rest for 2 weeks at a temperature of -1 in big containers.

The beer will be filtered, bottled and pasturised or not. Meanwhile the yeast and sugars are added to have a re-fermentation on the bottle. These crats will be placed in warm rooms at a temperature of 24 C for 3 weeks.

The total production of a specialty-beer is around 7 to 8 weeks. Simple lagers and pils take about 3 weeks. Heineken and Bud-light about 2 days. This is of course a little joke. We can laugh with these remarks. I always tell these kinds of jokes to Dutch people or Americans when doing a tour. Always funny.

By the way: *why are always laughing about this?* We encounter those beers all over the world. Most of the time, they taste a little bit like water with a flavor. I think that the only reason can be the logistics. Imagen that a Heineken from Amsterdam has to be transported to Nepal. It arrives over there after a long journey in Eastern-India, let's say Bangalore. When the container is on the bottom of the ship you are lucky, when on top it will be disposed to heat. When it arrives, it needs to go through customs. After that, they drive it to Nepal on trucks on bumpy roads, also in the heat. When arriving in Nepal for example, they deliver it into a storehouse in Kathmandu. From there it will be delivered to the hotels and bars. I guess it takes a few months to do that.

The expiry-date of pils-beers or lagers-premiums and ales lasts for 4 to 6 months. Transport by ship takes a lot of weeks depending where to deliver. The quality will wear down. I will not have a Stella Artois in Hong Kong for that reason, that is not done.

Facts.

Belgium is therefore clearly the center of the universe of beers. That's how I see it. I have already seen quite a lot of the world and everywhere I go, I try the local beers. Some are excellent, but some are much less in quality, some even not drinkable. Flavors and aromas are determined by their culture, their background and the necessary ingredients. And not all the ingredients are the same as in Belgium or the US. The water determines a large part of the taste, like 90% of it. It is the most important ingredient and water is different throughout the world. For example, on my trips in Nepal, I was drinking Tuborg or Carlsberg which were brewed on site, in Kathmandu. The water is different there, but the custody and maturation occur under different conditions other than elsewhere. So, it's not quite the same taste as in Denmark for example.

In Belgium, we already drink a lot of liters of beer and I am proud to be a beautiful link to it, together with many colleague' tasters and beer lovers. Fortunately, the number of liters per person in our country is not measured by how much I drink. The quantity for pils may have gone down from 115L per head per year to 75L the last 5 years. However, the quality of special beers has risen by 25%. Many new breweries appear on the scene. They are often microbreweries who want to conquer a place in this yellow universe. And rightly so, I think.

I cheer to these facts as long as I can inspire others to do the same thing and enjoy myself tasting it. The stimulation of your tongue, the explosions of bitterness and the long or sometimes short finish, makes me happy man. I'll automatically get in the mood by flushing my mouth, grabbing the sky saying that this sensation is so a nice feeling and experience. And as long as you do that with friends or family, life is beautiful.

Last time I was checking, we had about 308 working breweries in Belgium producing almost 2 billion liters. This is our cultural heritage and since 2017 a UNESCO Heritage. More than 1,2 billion liters are gone for export. So, that makes us drink 75 liters of pils per person (8.000.000 HL) . You can do that with beer. A beer you can drink, taste, swab, sniff, suck with a straw, mix with something else, lick, look, smell and so on.

70% of Belgium's beers consist of lagers, but the order of preference for most of the people are the trappist beers, then the abbey beers and the regional beers and then the strong blonde beers. We - with glorious Gauls as ancestors - drink about 800 million liters a year. And that's a lot. There have been some changes in the last 20 years. In the past, at the restaurant for example, practically no beer had been served, only wine. Those 15% beer drinkers at restaurants now, have risen to 25% in the meanwhile. Restaurant owners are also going to combine more and more special beers with their dishes. For me, the cheeses and beers are the perfect combination. You can go very far into it. I will write an idea about it at the end of this book.

What is this book about?

This book is an honest-easy-informal reading appetizer for beer lovers. It is a description of fifty known and less known beers and also about my personal experience of drinking and tasting these beers. It's definitely not a scientific book, because I know there are many of those. These are books written by brewers, engineers and other professors. Those men know everything from the inside-out and back and forward. We are just ordinary mortals, who are standing on the right side of the counter. We have chosen the side of enjoyment and not the side of the brewing and cleaning. Let's say for that matter, I've been growing a passion about it. I love wine, but I love beer even more.

You have to understand that the stories are written with humor, sarcasm and irony, and how beer-drinking men think about women: *a very classical cliché*. Don't get mad at the messenger, your sincere writer.

Every beer that is brewed in Belgium has a story that sometimes goes back for hundreds of years. Some beers are connected to ancient legends, some are pure fantasy. In this book, I describe fun, exciting and sometimes erotic stories that I have experienced during my search for this great product. Some stories are true and other stories are fully invented. I leave that to the reader's imagination. The story at the end of the description of the beer has been written in the "*me*" form. I have done this for the convenience and it writes easier. Each '*Story*' is marked with one (*), two (**) or three stars (***). You'll find that in the menus of the Chinese restaurants too. It determines the degree of '*spiciness of the text*'.

Some stories go back 40 years, others may be from last year or why not last week. Because eventually, I drink my beer every day. The beers that I describe are explained in a colorful way: *a bit informal*. I tell little facts that you may not have known. The book must also be a learning-discovery experience and it should encourage you to discover other beers and the history behind the beer.

Whether you have to perform the stories that are linked to it, is entirely at your own risk, which I cannot bear the responsibility for. In short, it must be pleasing and airy, and with humor. For ultimately, beer is that to me too.



Have a lot of fun reading!

And most of all: enjoy each beer, wherever it comes from...

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