

How Herr Heller keeps Cologne's beer flag flying

...and brings his K lsch to a new generation of beer drinkers

Germans are justifiably proud that they have far more breweries than any other nation, but do they really value variety? When breweries close in Germany, as they frequently do, there is rarely much of a protest.

Nor is there great evidence that Germans appreciate their choice of beer styles (though they are not alone in this shortcoming).

Among bottom-fermenting styles, much is heard of Pilsener, and there has been a small revival in dark lagers, but there are diminishing sales of the Munich Helles and M rzen, the Bock variations of Bavaria and Lower Saxony, and the Dortmunder Export type.

Of the top-fermenting brews, Bavarian-style wheat beers are doing wonderfully well, but the Weisse of Berlin, the K lsch of Cologne and the Altbier of D sseldorf are having a quieter time.

In Germany the other day, I met a beer-lover who has spent some years exploring his compatriots' responses to choice. His name is Hubert Heller, and he qualified as an engineer but for most of his career has preferred to run bars of one sort or another.

Inspired by the student caf s he saw on a visit to Berlin in the 1960s, Heller decided to establish something similar in his home town, Cologne, but to run it as a speciality beer bar.

The premises he found had the touch of history, in spirit at least: they had formerly housed a distillery, making an herbal bitters. Heller seemed unaware, when I raised the topic, of Henk Eggens' speciality beer bar In Der Wildeman, in a former gin distillery in Amsterdam.

The Cologne premises, in the centre of the city, at 33 Roon Strasse, not far from Z lpicher Platz and just off the Ring, are somewhat anonymous from the outside, with modern brickwork almost disguising the arch that once led into the distillery yard.

The words Hellers Brauhaus, and an ironwork sign depicting a malt shovel, mashing fork and brewer's star, are not especially conspicuous.

The arch now leads at ground level to a glassed-over caf  that is under separate management, but sells beer provided by Heller. His own premises are downstairs: in high, arched cellars of bare brick, with rather churchy windows between the various chambers.

Set into the brickwork is the odd gargoyle, carved from basalt dug in the Eifel region of the Rhineland. Heller is a tall, dark, bearded man whose smilingly demonic appearance suits the Gothic mood.

He originally opened this cellar bar in the 1980s, as the Deutsches Brauhaus, boasting a wide range of German beers, 17 of them on draught. The draughts included Steinbier from Coburg, Rauchbier from Bamberg, a copper-coloured lager from N rnberg, and an unfiltered Kellerbier.

While some of the beers sold well, the most distinctive did not, and the success of the bar never measured up to Heller's hopes. He had installed a scrapped brewery mash-tun and copper as items of decoration, and eventually decided to restore them to their original purpose. In 1992 the bar ceased to be an outlet for speciality beers, and became a brewpub, with the mash-tun and copper bubbling behind the bar.

In German brewpubs, the fashion is very much for unfiltered, cloudy beers. Heller decided to make an unfiltered counterpart to K lsch, the golden, top-fermenting style of the city.

However, an unfiltered beer cannot be called a K lsch, as that style must be bright, according to an appellation contr  l  e agreed to between the Association of K lsch Brewers and the German counterpart to the Office of Fair Trading.

He called his unfiltered beer Ur-Wiess ("Original White," the latter word in a Cologne spelling). The biggest K lsch producer, K ppers, also has an unfiltered version called Wiess.

This is available only at the public restaurant and beer-garden at the K ppers brewery (157 Alteburger Strasse. Tel 0221-373242).

Elsewhere in Germany, the term "white" is usually associated with wheat beers but it was in the past applied more generally to traditional top-fermenting styles. I have always believed this was because top-fermenting beers were characteristically hazier than lagers in the days before modern filtration techniques -- but it is also argued that the one produces a paler head than the other during fermentation.

Heller also ran into problems of terminology when he tried to incorporate into his house style an archaic spelling of Cologne. The Association of K lsch Brewers felt he was implying he was the only true original, rather than a Johannes-come-lately.

Given that Heller is introducing a young crowd to the city's brewing tradition, the Association might have been better employed honouring him. Youthful drinkers' ambivalence toward tradition is a problem for K lsch.

The mainstream producers' response (unintentionally 1950s-style ads showing smiling young people enjoying themselves) hardly cuts the mustard, let alone the sausage.

Heller seems undaunted, and has now added a filtered Kšlsch.

The two beers begin as one, at a gravity of 1050, and have about 4.8 per cent alcohol by volume. Both the barley malt (grown in the Rhineland Palatinate) and the blossom hops (from Hersbruck, in Bavaria) are organically cultivated.

In the Ur-Wiess, the yeast seems to add a little texture, but no bite, and the typical fruitiness eventually emerges, followed by a dash of late hop bitterness. With the yeast removed, the Kšlsch tastes maltier, creamier and sweeter.

Brauhaus Heller does not open for lunch. Its hours are from 4 p.m.-1 a.m. (tel 0221-242545).

Another newish, and very popular, address at which to drink Kšlsch is the Gaffel Haus, at Alter Markt, in the old town. This delightfully pubby establishment serves the filtered, but yeastily fruity, Kšlsch of the Gaffel brewery. Newcomers to the style, or the city, should also sample the beers at the brewpubs Malzmŷhle (6 Neumarkt) and Pŷffgen (64-66 Friesen Strasse) and at Cologne's most famous tavern, P.J. Fruh (12-14 Am Hof, near the Cathedral), which has its own brewery on another site.

That's just for starters. The Cologne-Bonn area has about two dozen brewers, so the Kšlsch association must have done something right somewhere along the line.

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