Porter and kvass in St. Petersburg

It is well known that, before the technique of malting was devised, grains were baked into bread to make them soluble for the brewer, and that this method was used in Mesopotamia, now a part of Iraq. It has always seemed to me that this bready way of brewing must have spread through Armenia into Russia, giving rise to kvass.

Kvass is traditionally made by baking whatever grains are available, most often rye, and producing a brew of low-to-medium strength, occasionally flavoured with fruit or herbs. The name comes from the Russian word for "leaven." The Russians regard it as a distinct drink, but it is surely an early form of beer. Either way, it is of considerable significance in the history of drink.

For the visitor to Russia, kvass was never easy to find. It was principally distributed by trucks like small petrol-tankers, which plied their trade in residential areas. People would come out with glasses, jugs, or jerricans to buy their kvass. It was a trade unseen by most tourists or business visitors. Nor were the Russians ever proud of this traditional drink, seeing it as rather primitive.

My own occasional visits to Russia have also tended to be at the wrong time for kvass: in winter, when vodka-drinking is at its height. Kvass has traditionally been regarded as a summer beverage.

I use the past tense because kvass is becoming even harder to find as Russia's trend-setters turn away from tradition in favour of Western products. Fortunately, such behaviour is not universal.

On a recent visit to St. Petersburg, I did spot on the edge of the city-centre a roadside hut painted with a word that in cyrillic letters looked rather like KBAC. I had with me a Russian-speaker who could confirm that the word was "kvass." The wooden hut had a serving hatch, at which I met the proprietor, a young man with the splendidly alcoholic name of Sergei Smirnoff.

Mr Smirnoff warned me that his stock of kvass had been delivered at the end of summer, in a 300-litre tank. Fresh, it had been sweet; now, it was somewhat sour, though I was told that some connoisseurs preferred it that way.

He poured me a glass, which formed a head of large bubbles like that sometimes found on cask ale from the stillage. The kvass had a sull amber colour, with a slight opalescence. It had a thin, firm, body, and the flavours of young lambic with nutty notes, some grainy breadiness and a minty spiciness. I feel sure the latter note came from rye, though peppermint is very occasionally used for spicing.

Mr Smirnoff told me that the kvass was brewed in a town 150 miles away, but could not explain why it was fetched so far. Nor was he able to answer any technical questions. He was, though,

keen to show me a vessel with a heated jacket in which he could warm a glass of kvass or beer to ease my shivering. This was, he said, very popular - especially with older people.
The traditional use in kvass of the grain rye probably led to its employment in more conventional beers. It is, after all, a staple grain in parts of Central and Baltic Europe.

In my hotel room, I found a bottle of beer called Baltika Original, the back label of which bore, in English, the strange promise of "a dark beer with a harmonious bread flavour". It was an amber-brown, strongish (5.6 abv, from an original gravity of 1060) lager which did, indeed, have the flavour of a crusty rye-bread. I found it tasty, interesting and warming.

Later, I had chance to visit the Baltika brewery, on a sprawling industrial estate of the edge of town. The place took some finding, among rail-tracks, but eventually its neon sign shone through the heavy snow.

I discovered that Baltika Original contains about five per cent rye (and a fair dose of crystal malt). Apparently several other Russian breweries make similarly rye-tinged lagers, though the style has no name.

The Baltika brewery was established as recently as 1990, by the state. As Communism faded, the brewery became a joint venture between its employees and a Baltic enterprise controlled by a major Nordic grouping: Hartwall, of Finland; Pripps, of Sweden; and Ringnes, of Norway. It has by European standards a huge capacity: three million hectolitres.

The Nordic notion for Baltika was originally to concentrate on an international interpretation of light-tasting lager. While this type of beer is popular among movers-and-shakers, the brewery soon realised that there was also a market for the fuller-bodied beers that are more traditional in Russia.

A Porter that was in the past produced occasionally as a winter special was in 1995 added as a regular brew. This is bottom-fermented, but in the vein of a Russian Imperial Stout. It was a thrill to taste such a beer in the city that gave the style its name.
Baltika Porter has an ebony colour; an alcohol content of 7.0, from an original gravity of 1068; and a woody aroma, with oily, creamy, fudgy, toffeeish, juicy, flavours. It is soft and lightly dry. This beer, too, contains crystal, and some carbonised malt.

The Imperial Stouts or strong Porters of St Petersburg proved a threefold pleasure. The best was at the city's oldest, and second largest, brewery, Stepan Razin. This brewery is named after a 16th-century folk hero, a Russian Robin Hood. A champion of the people against Tsarist rule, Stepan Razin was martyred by beheading, and his story inspired many drinking songs.

The brewery was founded by a German, Abraham Friedrich Kren (or Krohn), in 1795, with a friend who had worked in British breweries. The project was given the approval of Empress Catherine II. The original establishment is believed to have been a brewpub. The first equipment

is said to have been of British design, and the products were a top-fermented wheat beer and a Porter. After a merger in 1848, production was moved to the present site.

The brewery is near the centre of St Petersburg, in an old warehouse district on a canal linked to the river Neva. The original buildings, in imperial yellow, still stand, behind ornamental railings, with a 1960s maltings opposite. It was for many years known as the Kalinkinsky brewery, after the neighbourhood, but adopted the name Stepan Razin during the Communist period. The anti-authoritarian name has been retained, but the brewery is now a public company ("with no foreign capital", I was proudly told).

In the brewery's small museum, a turn-of-the-century price-list shows meads in three fruit flavours, a White Beer, Bohemian and Bavarian styles, both in dark and pale versions, and an Export (presumably of the Dortmunder type). There is also a Pale Ale and two Porters. One, described as "English Porter", is believed to have been modelled on British Stouts of that period. Another, more expensive, and identified simply as Porter, is thought to have been more of a "Russian Imperial".

The current range stretches to a good half dozen lagers, including a Märzen, which in Russian looks something like Maptobckoe. With an original gravity of 1058, but allegedly only 4.5 alcohol by volume, this emerged with a reddish amber colour, and a smooth, lightly chewy, maltiness.

Porter was a regular product until the 1960s, and continued to be made for New Year and Communist holidays. It is now once more a year-round product. The style has a small market, but is readily available. Stepan Razin Porter, at a hefty 1080, has an abv of 7.0-plus. It has a slatey black colour; a spicey (cinnamon?) aroma; a firm body, bitter-chocolate flavours; and a warming, liqueur-ish finish. It has three malts: the Pilsner-type made across the street, crystal and roasted. The beer is said to be matured for 80 days.

The Vienna Brewery, the city's third-largest, also has a strong Porter. This brewery is linked to Sinebrychoff, of Finland, and Carlsberg, of Denmark.

The smallest brewery in the city was founded under the name Bavaria. During the Soviet period, it became Red Bavaria, celebrating the German land's brief period of Communism. The brewery is once more called simply Bavaria. It is independent and struggling - and makes no Porter.

I was unable to visit either of these breweries in the time available, but tasted Vienna's winey, fruity, nutty, Imperial Porter at a judging in Moscow.

Where to drink

Although Porters enjoy relatively small sales, they are not difficult to find, and are often available at kvass or beer kiosks. Stepan Razin Porter can usually be found in central St Petersburg at Konnyshy Dvov, on the Gribeyodova Canal. There are also a couple of bars called Stepan

Razin, both usually serving the Porter. The more central is at 13 Ivanovskaya Ulitsa, the other at 336 Novorosiskiy Ulitsa.

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