

Hunting the highest beer

The highest brewery in Europe, they claimed. Superlatives are hard to resist, even if they are not always significant. I mean, would you buy the beer because the brewery occupied an elevated position?

Let's stop kidding around here: the height isn't going to influence flavor, is it? The best way to find out: go to the mountain-top.

From my office in London, taxi to Heathrow airport; plane to Zurich, Switzerland. From Zurich airport to the city's central railroad station. Train from there, south-east to the town of Chur, at the head of a broad valley between mountains. The main railroad line ends there. Chur is a market town and county seat.

I now take a local train through the mountains to Davos, a ski and toboggan resort that is known for various health therapies for the super-rich. Davos is also the resort of conferences (high-powered, appropriately) and is the home-base of the World Economic Forum.

At Davos, I am met by Andreas Aegerter, who drives me the eight miles to the village of Monstein, which is yet higher, at just under 5,000ft (1,627 metres). It occurs to me that "Monstein" sounds like a combination of French and German words, meaning "Mountainstone."

France, Germany and Italy are kept apart by the Alps, the greatest mountains of Europe. The mountain valleys and the shores of the snow-melt lakes accommodate the federation of cantons (counties) that comprise Switzerland.

France is to the west, and French is the language of that side of Switzerland, spoken by almost 20 per cent of the country's population. Most of the north and east speaks German, accounting for 60-65 per cent. The most southerly part speaks Italian, amounting to about seven per cent. Where the German-speaking part approaches the Italian-speaking part, a handful of remote valley communities speak the only truly Swiss language, an Alpine derivative of Latin, called Romansh.

Monstein is German-speaking. It is in the canton (county) of Graubünden, which mainly speaks German but also has an Italian-speaking minority and is the home of most Romansch-speakers.

I am told that the name Monstein derives from "monks." There was once a monastery nearby, though no one seems quite sure where. It is said that, in summer, the monks grazed their cattle in the valley where Monstein now clings to the mountainsides. There is no evidence of monastic brewing here; elsewhere in the east of Switzerland the abbey town of St Gallen has in its museum the world's oldest brewery plans, dating from the 800s.

Monstein's history as a community goes back to the 1300s. The cattle were fed on locally grown barley, though it may not have been good enough to make malt for beer. Local larch was used

for musical instruments, and still supports a number of furniture-makers. Local history is explained in the village's "old" church, built in 1668-9. In 1885, the church bell was replaced, and the new one proved too heavy. It fell, causing considerable damage. A "new" church was built at the opposite end of the village.

The only hotel in town is a former Kurhaus ("Cure House", or spa). Eighty years ago, it had the first bathroom in the area, but there still wasn't one in my room.

Andreas' background is in the hotel and restaurant business, and he worked for the Swiss brewpub group Back und Brau ("Bake and Brew"). He grew up near Zurich, but at one point, he had a job in Davos, and happened upon Monstein. His wife Leslie and their three daughters (one aged 10 and twins of eight) loved the place.

The one "modern" building in the village was a 100-year-old dairy. Its tall, narrow, clean, lines and the restrained decorative brickwork ambitiously claiming it as an example of Jugendstil architecture. It certainly contrasts with the wide slopes and heavy external woodwork of the typical Alpine buildings. The dairy had made a local cheese, but production had moved to Davos. Thanks to that foolish move, the world no longer has a cheese called Monsteiner - but there is a beer of that name.

When Andreas took a look at the empty building, he was charmed. The pulleys that drove the churns were still in place, and spoke of an agricultural industry. The interior style, right down to the arched cellars suggested the production of food or drink, perhaps a little fermentation?

Milk is no longer delivered; malt has taken its place: Pilsener, Carahell, Munich and smoked, all from Weyermann, of Bamberg. A dairy needs water, and so does a brewery, but that is no problem in a village on a snowy mountainside. Better yet, the water is filtered through the rock, emerging from a spring.

Decorative hops now grow outside, and may be picked and added to the odd brew inside. There is documentary reference to hops having been grown in Switzerland in the 1200s, and being used in bread (as a preservative?). There are Swiss allusions to hops in beer from the 1500s, and cultivation dates from the 1800s, albeit on a small scale. Those used at Monsteiner are of the "Swiss Hallertau" variety, from the country's very small growing area at Stammheim, north of Zurich and near Lake Constance. (The Germans call this lake the Bodensee. On the German side is the Tettngang growing area).

The Bamberg malt, Monstein spring water and Stammheim hops meet in a copper-clad, stainless-steel brewhouse bought new last year from Food Inc, of Stuttgart. The system sits in the front window of the former dairy. Despite it being only a two-vessel system, a decoction mash is used: double for pale beers, single for dark.

At this point, I also learned that height does matter. As compared to a brewery at more conventional altitude this one experiences a lower atmospheric pressure. The wort thus boils at

an inadequately low temperature. This factor is adjusted by a kettle that works like a pressure cooker.

The difference in pressure, and the thinness of the air (ie lack of oxygen) also make fermentation difficult. Whoever specified open vessels had not thought of this. Andreas had difficulty in finding a yeast that would function properly, but finally succeeded. The culture, supplied by an old-established independent brewery in Switzerland, is a strain from the brewing faculty in Berlin (the VLB). It is a bottom-fermenting yeast, but creates estery background flavours.

Switzerland's mainstream beers are very bland and uniform. At a tasting a few years ago, the country's brewers had difficulties in recognising their own products. On the one hand, it was easy for Andreas to produce something different. On the other hand, in a country where drinkers recognise blandness as the proper taste of beer, it is hard to sell anything else. This problem is, of course, not unique to Switzerland.

Who is shaping and refining the Monsteiner beers? Christian Ochs, from Hasselbach, in the Taunus Hills of Germany, studied nutrition. He then worked in nearby Frankfurt as a brewer at Binding, an enterprise best known for its Clausthaler "alcohol-free" beer. Binding does also make a full range of German styles, albeit not very exciting. Christian, now 30, answered an ad to work at Monsteiner.

The principal Monsteiner brew is identified simply as the "house beer," in a Swiss-German spelling. Huusbier is in style somewhere between a Dortmunder Export and a Märzen. It has an original gravity of 13.5 Plato (1054) and an alcohol content in excess of 4.5. This beer has a pillowy head; a full gold to pale bronze color; a sweet, perfumy, malt aroma; a cookie-like, nutty, dryness, developing vanilla notes; and a hint of acidity (dessert apples?) in the finish.

A darker, amber-to-ruby, beer at a similar strength is called Wetterguoge, after an Alpine salamander. The grist for this beer contains a very small proportion (six per cent) of smoked malt. This imparts a light smokiness throughout: in aroma, palate and finish. Apart from that, the aroma is creamy; the body light but smooth and firm; the palate offering suggestions of walnut, and a touch of sweetness, the finish drier and appetising.

The brewery has made seasonals, using herbs, spices and honey, but is still developing its range. It also collaborates with a bakery in Davos that produces spent-grain bread, A dairy makes cheese containing beer and hops. A local butcher feeds his pigs on spent grain and beer. The salting of the bacon is made with a solution containing beer and hops. These products are available in a tasting room at the brewery.

Contact the brewery at Info@biervision-monstein.ch



Once a dairy, now a brewery.



The hotel flags up the new beer



Andreas raises a salamander.

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