

Porter! Take me to the castle of Dr Hoepfner ...

My obsession with strong porters and stouts was further tickled some years ago when I heard that such a brew had once been made in Germany, a country not known for its openness to "foreign" beer-styles. I was told about this "English Porter" by a German brewer who had enjoyed a brief encounter with its production in the earliest days of his career, at the Dressler brewery, now long defunct, in Bremen.

The porter was, he said, made with the semi-wild yeast *Brettanomyces*. "Why?" I asked. "Because that is how you make an English porter," he informed me. No doubt this notion, still extant also in Japan, dates from the days when porters were stored in wood, and blended.

Given the history of British strong porters or Imperial stouts being shipped across the North Sea and the Baltic, the notion of one having been made in one of Germany's few port cities, while surprising, is less than astonishing. Even Bremen's Beck's brewery has been known to make a high-gravity malt-extract beer, and something similar to a Berliner Weisse, as well as its unexceptional lager.

It seems that Dressler may have made its porter from at least the turn of the century, and that the product lingered until the late 1960s or even 1970s.

Much more surprisingly, customers for this beer were subsequently supplied with a similar product made far inland, at the Hoepfner brewery, in the city of Karlsruhe, capital of the old region of Baden, and a gateway to the Black Forest.

Hoepfner is a surname, one of those that derive from an occupation. The family were hop farmers, though a member who was a priest founded the brewery, in 1798. The present brewery buildings date from 1898. Thus Hoepfner celebrates a double centenary this year. There were celebrations last month (March), in addition to the festival that takes place every May.

The castle-like brewery, on the eastern edge of the city-centre, is set in parkland of lime trees, chestnuts and oaks. The buildings, of red sandstone, are spectacular in their Gothic/Renaissance Revival battlements, turrets and towers. Adjoining them is the 1904 Vienna Secession house of the owner.

Around the time the present brewery was built, the company was making what it called a Deutsche Porter. I heard about this in the early 1980s, and excitedly made inquiries, only to be told that production has just ceased. Apparently demand had fallen to a point where the beer was going stale on the shelves.

There have been two significant developments since then. One is that the sixth generation of Hoepfners has taken over the running of the company. The other is that, with the reunification of

Germany, the rediscovery of Eastern "black" lagers has created a new fashion. If it is possible for people to enjoy a Schwarzbier, how about a porter?

This year, Dr Friedrich Georg Hoepfner reintroduced porter to the brewery's range. The beer has an original gravity of 16.3 Plato (just above 1065); is produced from three malts (dark Munich, crystal and black; providing a colour of 120 EBC); hopped with Tettnangers and Saazers (47 IBU); and emerges with an alcohol content of 5.8 per cent by volume (4.64 by weight).

I tasted an experimental version made with a top-fermenting Altbier yeast. This was textured and toffeeish, with notes of vanilla and licorice. Surprisingly, a bottom-fermented interpretation seemed more burnt-tasting and smoky, especially in the finish. The latter version, matured for about a month, has now been put on the market.

Apparently the original Hoepfner Deutsche Porter was slightly stronger, smoother and less smoky. How did a German brewery so far inland ever come to make a porter in the first place. "It's a tradition to be a little strange in this brewery," was as good an explanation as Dr Hoepfner could muster.

I also tasted a newish top-fermenting, pale amber, beer of 13.7 Plato (1055), made with Pilsner, Munich and smoked malts, called Blue Star. This brew was originally made only on New Year's Eve, on the advice of an astrologer. "We were told that a beer made when Jupiter was in Venus would be popular and loved," explained Dr Hoepfner. The beer, at 5.5 alcohol by volume (4.4 by weight), is dry and oily, with good malt flavours and a developing gentle smokiness.

A bottom-fermenting bronze beer of 5.6 abv, very nutty, with a balancing hoppy dryness, was launched in 1982 to celebrate the 75th birthday of Dr Hoepfner's father. This Jubelbier bears a label originally designed for the Duke of Baden's golden wedding in 1906.

Another interesting label appears on a Krausen (sedimented) version of the brewery's Export type. The label is designed to seem upside down, encouraging the drinker to upturn the bottle and thus arouse the sediment. Including this brew, Hoepfner has no fewer than three variations on the Export theme. The basic Export has a gravity of 12.6 Plato (1050), yielding an abv of 5.2. A "super-premium" variation called Godkopfle has the same alcohol content, but from a gravity of 13.9 (1056). This is therefore more full-bodied and malt-accented.

The brewery is very proud of its Pilsner (11.5 Plato; 1046; 4.8 abv), which is hopped with four varieties to a hefty bitterness of 37 IBU. Its aromas are as fresh and delicate as mint; its maltiness clean, sweet and soft; its finish late and dry but restrained.

The flavours of the beer owe something to the configuration of the brewery. The building is set round a courtyard. On one side are apartments for the five master brewers; on another, the working maltings (of the box type); on a third, the brewhouse (traditional copper, using double decoction). It is a handsome brewhouse, in which classical concerts are sometimes held.

Fermentation is entirely in open vessels, with a yeast that was once widely used but is now exclusive to Hoepfner. My feeling is that open vessels provide for a fuller flavour, especially maltiness, and that the "traditional" yeast gives just a hint of new-mown hay in the aroma. Even the lagering is in horizontal tanks, rather than cylindro-conicals.

At the brewery tap, called the Burghof, I was guest speaker at a beer dinner. The aperitif was the Pilsner laced with Amer Picon, a French patent bitters along the lines of a fruitier Campari. This beer-and-bitters combination is a popular drink across the border in Alsace. We had Blue Star and beer-bread with vegetable soup; the Kräusen beer with baked pike-perch; a peach-infused Export with a lime sorbet; the Jubelbier with beef and noodles; and a beer-brandy with cherry tartlets. Most of the brewery's dozen or so beers were used either as accompaniment or ingredient in the various dishes.

I was astonished to learn that the peach brew had been sold in the odd local Konditorei (cake shop). What about the German Beer Purity Law? The answer is that the product is not described as a beer but as a Cerveise. No matter that this is an old French word for beer.

The pièce de resistance at the dinner was a Sumerian-style beer, produced in small batches in vessels away from the main brewhouse. This was flavoured with wormwood, cinnamon, cloves and ginger, and fermented with "wild" yeasts. These were supplied by the yeast library at Weihenstephan, the university brewing faculty of Munich.

Two versions of the brew were made, one for ladies, the other for gentlemen. This seemed a quaintly sexist notion, but I was more than ready to excuse what must be the most eclectic brewery in Germany.

The Sumerian beer was very complex indeed. The gentlemen's version seemed to have figs and toffee in the aroma, with malt-loaf and butter in the palate; and a sherryish, cidery finish. The ladies' version was lighter, livelier and more honeyish.

The Sumerian beer was served in a chalice shaped like a lotus flower. This vessel had been made in Estonia. I asked why. "Partly because no one in Germany could supply us, but also because I have some family links with Estonia," explained Dr Hoepfner. Perhaps that explains the porter, too - a drop of the Baltic in the family's bloodstream?

Published Online: SEPT 11, 1999

Published in Print: APR 1, 1998

In: Ale Street News