

Ale and hearty

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Since the days of Andre Simon, most wine writers have shown an enthusiasm for good beer. So, these days, do the best of restaurant critics, usually ready to highlight a wine list that includes a decent brew or two.

Of cookery writers, I am less sure. I was outraged the other day to hear Delia Smith offering beef in beer as simply a sixties dish. Sure, it used to be a dinner party stand-by in the decade beloved of all 50 somethings, but it is much more than that. And we use still, St. Delia, while wielding what looked like a bottle of Sainsbury's *bire de garde*, uttered the shameful suggestion: "Use a Continental lager: if in doubt, the one with the prettiest label." Delia, both cuisine and beer deserve a more respectful, discriminating approach. Would you, or any cookery writer suggest that even a simple dish such as *coq au vin* could be made with "any wine...", choose one in a nice bottle"?

If you are, by the way, tempted to try *coq au vin*, I suggest a *bire de garde*, such as Sainsbury's. If you can find them, *bires de garde* such as *Tres Monts* or *La Choulette* are even better examples.

Bire de garde, from around Lille in northern France is a classic style of beer with a nutty spiciness that accentuates the sweetness of chicken or pork. It was originally made big and mafty and laid down for summer when the weather was too hot for brewing hence the name. "Keeping beer" or "stock ale" is the long-gone British equivalent last sighted in Kent after the advent of artificial refrigeration we gradually dropped the style, but the French kept it as a year-round pleasure. Look out for it in champagne bottles, wired and corked and sometimes tissue-wrapped.

Where northern France and Belgium meet, grapes, apples and cherries rub shoulders with malting barley and hops; haute cuisine embraces Germanic heartiness; wine smooches with beer. Between the Ardennes and the coast of Flanders, chefs cook with beer. These traditions date back to charcoal-burners of the Ardennes forests and the hermitages and abbeys of that region, the latter often boasting their own brewhouse. *Carbonade flamande*, beef braised with beer, is said to owe its name to its having originally been cooked in a pot set on charcoal - carbon.

It too, might be prepared with biere de garde, but surely a Belgian ale does the job better. Again, Sainsbury's has its own label, based on a Gueuze Lambic, a type of beer made to the west of Brussels, that has the tartness imparted by wheat and a winy, fino sherry sourness that derives from the use of wild yeasts. These acidic notes tenderise the meat when the beer is used as a marinade. Perhaps that is why Escoffier suggested it.

My own preference is for a Belgian brown ale such as Liefmans' Goudenband ("gold riband"), brewed in Dentergem and aged in cellars in Oudenaarde, in the region known as the Flemish Ardennes. This brew is available in almost all specialist beer shops in Britain.

Liefmans' Goudenband has a half-wild yeast that gives it the acidity to act as a marinade, but the dark malts used produce a raisiny sweetness that adds greatly to the cooking liquid.

When I first encountered Liefmans, the brewery dating from the 1600s. was run by a former ballet dancer Rose Blankaert. a distant relation of the famous cyclist Eddie Merckx. She once took me for lunch at a fish restaurant where I was accidentally locked in the lavatory after that I always suggested we went to a place where we could eat meat. I introduced Mine Rose to Father Theodore, an equally famous brewer from the monastery of Chimay and he made a similar request, complaining that too much fish was served at the abbey. Shortly after that Mine Rose left the brewery and took over the management of a cafe called De Mouterij ("The Maltings") in Oudenaarde.

Belgian cooking and its relationship with fine brews, are rooted in the country's culture. And not all Continental brews are lagers. The best biere de garde is not. Neither are Lambics, Belgian ales and most other specialities of that country. Nor are German brews such as the Altbier of Dusseldorf, the Kolschbier of Cologne or the wheat beers of Berlin and Bavaria. Not lagers - none of them.

All, because of their ale-like complexity have a role in the kitchen. Serve shrimp with the tart Belgian ale, Rodenbach. Steam mussels in Lambic. Use that beer, or a Berliner Weisse, in a vinaigrette, especially with hop shoots or bean sprouts. Serve the coriander-tasting Trappist ale Westinalle Tripel with asparagus, artichokes or palm hearts. Make sorbets with a cherry Kriek or raspberry Frambozen. Offer orange dessert with the Curacao-tinged Hoegaarden wheat beer. Moist chocolate cake with Rochefort "10" Trappist beer. Marinade Roquefort cheese in the port-like Chimay Grande Reserve.

In the Rhineland last week, I had a salad of field greens with bacon and croutons, served with a warm potato sauce made with Diebels Altbier. In Bavaria, I have been served elderflower fritters in a batter spiced with a dark wheat beer. The distinguished food historian Reay Tannahill has argued - she was saying it in this newspaper the other day - that beer belongs with heavy dishes and a mode of eating that has gone out of style. She has obviously been dining in the wrong places.

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