

# German porter has deep roots in Black Forest

A fixation with porters and stouts can take extreme forms. I even know a fellow who wrote an entire book on the subject.

My own obsession was further tickled some years ago when I heard an "English" strong porter had once been made in Germany, a country not known for its openness to "foreign" beer styles.

I was told about this porter by a German brewer who produced it at the now defunct Dressler brewery 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 replied. No doubt this notion 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.

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

More surprisingly, customers for this beer were subsequently supplied with a similar product made 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, in addition

to the festival that takes place every May.

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

Around the time the present brewery was built, the company was making a "Deutsche Porter". I heard about this in the early 1980s, and made inquiries, only to be told production had just ceased due to falling demand.

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 range. The beer has an original gravity of 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 a 5.8 per cent ABV.

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 1055 degrees, 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 percent, is dry and oily, with good malt flavours and a developing gentle smokiness.

A bottom-fermenting bronze beer of 5.6 per cent, very nutty, with a balancing happy 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 arouse the sediment. Including this brew, Hoepfner has three variations on the Export theme. The basic Export is 5.2 per cent ABV.

A "super-premium" variation called Godkopfle has the same alcohol content, but from a higher gravity and is more full-bodied and malty.

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

The flavours of the beer owe something to the configuration of the castle-like brewery. The building is set round a courtyard. On one side are apartments for the master brewers; on another, the working maltings (of the box type); on a third, the brewhouse (traditional copper, using double decoction).

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 cylindroconicals.

At the brewery tap, called the Burghof I was guest speaker at a beer dinner. Most of the brewery's dozen or so beers were used either on accompaniment or ingredient in the various dishes.

The piece 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. Two versions were made, one for ladies, the other for gentlemen. This seemed quaintly sexist, but I excused what must be the most eclectic brewery in Germany.

The Sumerian beer was very complex. 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' variety 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," said Dr Hoepfner.

Perhaps that explains the porter, too - a drop of the Baltic in the family's bloodstream?

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