

From Leeds to Lithuania for mushy pea beer

Does a lager brewed in part from peas constitute a style?

As a small boy on the way to visit my grandparents, I rode the Leeds trains and puzzled over the ads they bore: Tizer the Appetizer (what did the second word mean?); Tetley's (I had never in my life encountered a man sporting what I now know to be a monocle, let alone hunting pink); Melbourne (still, in the 1950s, brewing and promoting its beer with a frock-coated courtier, equally baffling to me).

At my grandparents, there was Tizer on the table, but none of the other delights. My father said he remembered my grandmother brewing mead in the cellar.

"She poured it out of a stone jar, and a rat once came out," he confided. "That mead really had body." He told me the story countless times, with tireless pleasure at the pun.

On the rare occasions that she spoke to me, I could scarcely understand her sparse, heavily-accented English.

She was probably chanting the refrain of every Jewish grandmother: "Eat, boychick! Eat and enjoy!" All I remember is: "Eat your green peas!" Given the redness of her borscht, why did she refer to colour only for peas? Weren't they always green?

My grandparents came from Kowno (now more often known as Kaunas) in Lithuania.

I have long wanted to visit Lithuania, and recently I did. Programs and wars have all but erased the culture I tasted as a child in Leeds, and my grandparents knew in Raunas, but I did manage to see mead being made, and to sample the richly honeyish, herbal result.

Curiously, the meadery was a former brewery, which had gradually reverted to the older tradition in the 1960s, during the Soviet period. It had been state owned and the director had seen a future in a more specialised product. Even under Soviet rule, someone understood "niche marketing".

The old brewery building still stood, a tiny brick tower that may be unique in Lithuania, but would not look out of place in the Black Country. It is at Stakliskes, between Kaunas and Vilnius, the capital. Its product is simply called Lithuanian Mead (Lietuviskas Midus).

Kaunas is in the middle of Lithuania. It is the second city with a population approaching half a million and a tradition of textiles.

When I made formal approaches in advance, one of its two breweries was allegedly "closed for refurbishment", a familiar excuse in Eastern Europe.

The other, the Ragutus ("Drinking Horn") brewery, made me most welcome. The brewery is near the railway station and behind an office facade a 1960s brewhouse sits in buildings from the 1860s.

The brewhouse bore the scars of low investment and perhaps a lack of motivation among management. Gradually, those conditions are changing.

I was shown round by the technical director, a man whom I thought resembled Mikhail Gorbachev.

He offered me his two main beers, the first a pale bronze lager of about 4.2 per cent alcohol by volume.

"Is this all-malt?" I asked, expecting it to contain an adjunct. "No," he replied, "about 15 per cent of the grist is green peas."

Suddenly I became a kid in short pants. As the alcohol reached my brain, Mr Gorbachev assumed the Russian-looking face of my grandmother: "Drink your green peas!" I recovered my composure and asked why peas were used. Presumably as a cheap adjunct?

He said this was not the reason. He felt the protein in the peas helped head retention, and that they contributed to the palate.

When pressed on the latter point, he mused that they created a "thicker body" and "richer flavour". I had already noted that this brew had a well-retained head and now I began to wonder whether I tasted peas.

The production director explained that the custom of using peas came from the Birzai region, the heartland of brewing in Lithuania. The beer's name, Sirvenos, derived from a lake in the region.

The brewery also has a beer called Birzieciu, named after the region itself. This is a reddish-brown lager of 6.1 per cent, with a rich malt character, followed by whisky and sherry notes.

It contains crystal malt from the Czech Republic, and white sugar as an adjunct. "In the past, we used brown sugar from Cuba," the production director explained. So far as I could establish, the distinctive flavours were a "house" character, developing during a 50-day lagering.

Does a lager brewed in part from peas constitute a style? Probably not, but it is certainly a noteworthy variation.

I subsequently found more examples, variously known as Birzai, Radvilu (after the region's aristocratic family), "country beer" or even "home-brew".

All were strong, reddish lagers, very malty, with smoky or winey house characters. They were all said to be made with lager yeasts, though flavours ranged from ale-ish to Lambic-like.

Several were available only on tap. In their combination of bottom-fermentation and cellar character, they reminded me of some French bieres de garde.

In the Old Town of Vilnius, at a restaurant called Stikliai, I tasted on draught a "country beer", allegedly home-brewed, and said to come from the Birzai region. It was refreshing, fruity, orangey, and Lambic-like.

In the northern town of Panevezys, I visited a brewery founded in 1902 as Bergschlosschen ("Castle" or "Manor" on the Hill), by a German. Some of the buildings survive, and in a museum pictures are displayed showing it as a classic turn-of-the-century lager brewery. The brewery's name has been translated into the Lithuanian, Kalnapilis.

Here I tasted another version of Sirvenos, which I was told had once contained nine per cent green peas but now had only three. Again, it had a good head, and I thought it tasted sweeter.

Under the old system, where breweries did not compete, each produced much the same range, often with identical names, though that is changing.

The brewery also produces a Birzai variation, at 5.9 per cent, called Radvilu- This, again, is full in colour, lightly toffeeish and tart.

A sizeable share in Kalnapilis is now held by Finnish brewers Hartwall and the Swedish Pripps. Kalnapilis in turn owns the small local brewery.

This may change. The Finns and Swedes do not feel strongly that they need this small establishment, and the Birzai brewers would like their independence. There may be a management buy-out.

The wiles of capitalism are weaseling their way into the backwaters of Lithuania.

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