

Down on your knees to bless monks' top ale

Although monastery in French Flanders no longer brews, its influence continues

Have you heard of the monastery of Mont des Cats, near the hop-growing village of Steenvoorde, in French Flanders? Perhaps not.

Mont des Cats, an Augustine monastery in the 1700s and Trappist since 1826, has not brewed since the beginning of this century, but seems to have doubly, if confusingly, influenced the beers across the border in the nearby town of Watou, Belgium.

The brews of Mont des Cats are said to have been the basis for the complex Het Kapittel range still made by the Van Eecke brewery in Watou.

Het Kapittel, or "The Chapter", probably refers to monks from Mont des Cats who, during a period of instability in France, crossed the border to establish a refuge in Watou. There the brothers established a dairy farm and developed a market for their cheese. When they returned to France, a family of cheese makers took over.

In the recovery period after World War II, the family, called Claus, turned their dairy into a brewery. The stimulus for this was a request to produce beer for another Trappist monastery, St Sixtus, in nearby Westvleteren.

During that half-century, the monks of Westvleteren produced beer for sale at the abbey, while the Claus family brewed a St Sixtus range for wider distribution.

This arrangement was never ideal as the two versions never quite corresponded: those made at the abbey were distinctly malty while the examples from the Claus family were estery and fruity.

I have always enjoyed both, and do not recall ever having been critical of Claus versions, though a Dutch translation of my 1977 "World Guide to Beer" implied that I was. In 1992, Westvleteren installed a bigger brewhouse, and ended the arrangement.

The Claus family's brewery is south of the town, on a country road near the border. The road was called Abele Street until a local government reorganisation in the 1970s. At that point, the local municipality expanded to include more than one Abele Street, so this one was renamed Trappist Way.

The argument for this was that the road linked the farm with the abbey across the border. This enabled the Claus family to use the word Trappistenweg on its labels.

The use of this address has been the subject of litigation on the part of the Trappist breweries.

The Claus enterprise has always been known as St Bernardus, after the brief Trappist refuge. It has now adopted this name for its beers, which worthy of respect in their own right.

The brewery, masked by lime trees, is in the imposing 1930s building that once housed the dairy. The whitewashed brewhouse has handsome copper vessels bought used in 1946.

An arbor of chestnut trees leads to an office in a renaissance-style house on a cobbled courtyard. The office has a billiard table and oriental antiques collected by owner Guy Claes. The brewery also operates a small but stylish bed-and-breakfast hotel (fax 32-57-388071).

There are four St Bernardus beers, labelled with numbers based on the old Belgian gravity scale. Pater 6, at 6.7 per cent ABV, has a chestnut colour and is very fruity. Prior 8, at 8 per cent, is ruby to purple in colour, with an oily richness of texture and a coconut-like fruity maltiness. Abbot 12 (10 per cent plus) is almost ebony, very big and assertive, like a warming coconut brandy. A newer Triple (7.5 per cent) has a pale amber colour, the aroma of rose-water, and the orangey grassy flavours of Styrian hops. All have re-fermentation in the bottle, but the Triple with a different yeast.

After some years in which light, refreshing wheat beers like Hoegaarden have enjoyed a vogue in Belgium, Triples are currently having a mini boom. The national giant Interbrew, perhaps concerned by its reliance on Hoegaarden as a house speciality, has been promoting beers licensed by the Norbertine abbey of Leffe, including a Triple.

This may have helped draw attention to the style - Tripel in Flemish.

The term probably has its origins in the days before literacy, when casks were branded with one, two or three crosses (or other symbols) to indicate strength.

Some Belgians argue that there the terms single, double and triple indicated gravities of three, six and nine in the local scale (which approximated to alcohol by volume). Beers of "triple" strength are said to have been especially associated with the city of Bruges.

I believe the first golden Triple was produced by the Three Lindens brewery, at Brasschaat, near Antwerp, in the post-war period, when brewers of strong, top-fermenting beers were trying to compete with Pilsener-style lagers.

When the Three Linden brewery closed, its product, under the name Witkap, was taken over by the Slagmuylder brewery, at Ninove, west of Brussels.

The style was subsequently popularised by the outstanding example made by the Trappist brewery of Westmalle, near Antwerp.

The best examples of this style have a tantalising combination of clean, biscuity, maltiness; estery fruitiness; and flowery hop dryness. I have tasted several new Triples in the past year. The most remarkable was made by the Bosteels brewery, of Buggenhout.

Bosteels' new Triple was inspired by the fashion for multi-grain breads. The beer, at 8 per cent, is made from barley, wheat and oats, in both raw and malted forms, heavily spiced, and lightly hopped with Styrian Goldings. It has vanilla and orange in the aroma; a wheaty lightness and crispness for a beer so strong, but also an oaty creaminess; and a spicy, lemony, almost quinine dryness.

After creating this beer, the brewery discovered a three-grain brew had been made by Carmelite friars at nearby Dendermonde in the 1600s. Based on this, it called its beer Karmeliet.

Karmeliet is presented in one of Belgium's most elegant beer glasses, decorated with a stylised fleur-de-lys. The glass was designed by Antoine Bosteels, one of the principals of the brewery. The fleur-de-lys is intended simply as a traditional decorative motif, and not a French symbol.

The brewery is already known for the stirrup cup in which it serves a strong ale named after a local innkeeper Pauwel Kwak.

The Bosteels' interest in antiques and decorative arts is reflected in the furnishing of the house that stands in front of their "chateau" brewery. White-washed, and set around a courtyard, the brewery dates from 1791, and has been in the family for six or seven generations.

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