

Chastity, poverty and a pint

They don't talk about it much, but Trappist monks have been brewing good strong beer for ages, writes Michael Jackson

As my beliefs do not require me to give up any food or drink for Lent (which begins in the middle of this month), I shall instead add a pleasure. I shall buy myself enough Trappist beer to see me through to Easter.

Trappist beer is an appellation contr  e in the world of beer. It covers the beers made by one Trappist monastery in the Netherlands and five in Belgium. These six monasteries all specialise in strong, very fruity ales, which are yeast-sedimented with a secondary fermentation in the bottle. Some produce only one ale, but others make three or more.

The notion of specialising in strong brews dates from the time when these beers were regarded as "liquid bread" to sustain the body during Lent.

Even in the rest of the year, beer was once "absolutely necessary to balance the diet", a brother at one of the Trappist monasteries told me recently. "Trappists would have died without it." Traditionally, Trappists did not eat cheese or fish. Those rules have now been relaxed and several of the monasteries make their own cheese, usually in the style of Port Salut, but the Trappists still, in mock derision, dub their Cistercian cousins "meat-eaters."

For their daily consumption, with meals, some of the Trappist monasteries make a beer of relatively low strength, perhaps 3.5 per cent by volume. For liturgical holidays and commercial sale, they may produce a stronger "double" and a "triple," with strengths ranging from around 6 per cent to more than 11 per cent.

The lowest strength compares in alcohol content with an ordinary bitter, the highest with a wine. The sales of these beers are used to support the monasteries and the work of the order.

The one brewing monastery in the Netherlands is in the Catholic south of the country, near the city of Tilburg, not far from the Belgian border. It uses the simple name La Trappe under which it markets a ruby-coloured, pruny, sherry-ish double and a paler, drier, more herbal-tasting triple.

Some of the monasteries own nearby inns, but casual visitors are not readily admitted to the cloisters or breweries. The Trappists are a silent order and may speak only in the course of prayer, study or work.

Over the years I have visited all of the Trappist breweries. Most recently I spent a morning at the monastery of Westmalle, near Antwerp. Brother Thomas, the brewery's technical director, was

in table-thumping form over the qualities of his triple. This has an unusually pale golden colour and is aromatically hoppy and fruity, with a suggestion of bitter oranges.

In my view it is one of the world's great beers, and I suspect Brother Thomas agrees.

"Drink it with asparagus!" (Bangs table with glass.) "What wine goes with asparagus?" (Thump.) "That's difficult, eh?" (Thump, thump.) "Keep some for five or six years, then use it to make a sabayon. It's perfect."

All the Trappist brews contain residual sugars and living yeast and -- unlike conventional beers -- will improve with age. They need to be stored at a cellar temperature (on their side if they are in corked bottles) and should not be refrigerated.

The double type may round out for a month or two, but the strongest ones develop for several years, gradually gaining port-like characteristics.

The strongest, at 11-11.5 per cent, is the rich, creamy beer simply called Abbot, from the monastery of Westvlereten, near the hop-growing town of Poperinge, not far from Ypres. I know devotees who take weekend trips to Ostend to visit Taverne Bottletje (19 Louisa Straat) and sample this hard-to-find beer.

My own newest enthusiasm is for the chocolate-tasting beers from the monastery of Rochefort, near the town of the same name, where the Meuse valley rises into the Ardennes. I had passed through towns full of chocolatiers, bakeries and charcuteries on my way to visit Brother Antoine, the monk who then told me about beer and survival.

The most widely known brewing monastery, also in the Ardennes, is Chimay, near the tourist town of that name. And Chimay's technical director, Father Theodore, is one of Belgium's leading brewing scientists.

Chimay's capsule rouge (7 per cent by volume), with its soft, blackcurranty fruitiness, is the one being sold by the multiples. I would serve it as I would a burgundy, perhaps with a carbonnade flamande or a rabbit stew.

The white top (8.0v) is much drier and is sometimes served in its home country with the vinegary trout dish escavèche. The red-top (9.0v), also bottled with a gold label under the name Grand Reserve, is the spiciest and most port-like.

This last beer is, in my view, another world classic. So is Orval, the only truly dry Trappist beer. Orval is intense and almost sour, a wonderful aperitif. It is made at the monastery of Orval, near Florenville in the far south-east of Belgium.

Like all of the brewing monasteries, Orval was revived after the secularization of the Napoleonic period, but it originated in 1070. The magnificent Romanesque-Burgundian monastery of the late Twenties stands alongside ruins of earlier incarnations.

The Trappists are the most rigorous of orders and interpret strictly the rule that they must live off their own resources. They are also a closed order. Those philosophies may have helped them maintain their brewing tradition.

Belgium has Norbertine and Benedictine monasteries , means "monks"), by the Paulaner brewery (now secular), under the name Salvator ("Saviour"). The new season's brew is broached about a month before Easter and a few cases usually find their way to Britain.

By mid-March I shall be stocking up with those.

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