

Prague abbey's new brewpub offers classic lagers

The Czechs now have an abbey brewery, their first for more than half a century. The former brewhouse building at the abbey of Strahov, close to Prague Castle, has been brought back to life. The brothers do not have a direct business interest in the new enterprise -- the premises are rented to the brewery -- but the availability of beer and food is bringing attention back to an historic and charming corner of the city.

Just below the Castle, the Strahov Abbey is on Petrin Hill, overlooking the "Little Quarter" or "Lesser Town" (Mala Strana), where nobility once lived among slivers of parkland. It was established in 1140, and its Norbertine community has been revived since the collapse of Communism. Much of the present structure dates from the late 1600s and 1700s, including spectacular neo-classical buildings that accommodate the Museum of Czech Literature. Mozart played in the abbey church.

The abbey probably brewed from its foundation, but the first mention of the activity is at the turn of the 1200s and 1300s. The monastery and brewery were destroyed during the Hussite wars, and endured at least one further period of closure, but beer was being made as recently as 1905. Another abbey, the Augustine community of St Thomas, also in the Lesser Town, continued to brew until shortly after the Communist takeover, and is still a beer restaurant.

What Strahov Abbey now has is a brewpub. It is called The Cloister Restaurant and Brewery (Klasterni Restaurace a Pivovar). It occupies three heavily restored buildings: the former brewhouse; stables; and large, vaulted and chandeliered, refectory.

It was developed by a restaurant and hotel company, and sold its first beer in the middle of last year. The brewhouse building serves its original purpose. It is identified as "The Brewery", while the other buildings comprise "The Restaurant". Parts are opened only for private functions. Brass bands and folk dancing are featured.

The Brewery and has a Czech-built 10-hectolitre, two-vessel, copper-clad, system, open to the public area; a bar area featuring a great deal of copper piping; and half a dozen tables. Its beers, both bottom-fermented) are known as Svaty (Saint) Norbert, Svetle and Tmave ("pale": and "dark"). Both have a double decoction mash. They are unfiltered, but relatively bright. My dismay at seeing wine also being served was mitigated by the fact that, while Bohemia is famously beer country, Moravia is known for grapes. The wines are made in that region, and are also labelled St Norbert. The complex additionally has a bakery. Typical Czech food is served.

The Svetle is in the Pils style. Its gold-to-flame color is very Czech, but its hearty finish more extrovert than most. It is brewed wholly from Czech Pilsner malt, at a gravity of 12-plus (around

1052), producing 5.0 per cent alcohol by volume. The brew is hopped three times, with Saaz in the form of pellets.

Both beers are made with city water, which is not treated. The yeast is from the Czech Research Institute for Malting and Brewing.

The Svetle poured with a good, rocky, head. The hop aroma was assertive and firm, seeming to tell my nose that this would be a bitter beer. The first mouthful lapped over my tongue like spring water, then smoothened into firm maltiness, developing an appetising finish that seemed drier than the proposed 35 units of bitterness.

The Tmave counterpart is brewed from four malts (Pilsner, Munich, Crystal and Dark), to a gravity of 14 (1056), producing about 5.5 percent alcohol. It is hopped to 37 units of bitterness. It has an almost ebony color; is very smooth; and is leaner, firmer and drier than most Czech dark lagers, but with beautifully combined flavors.

Brewer Martin Matuska was once assistant at the famous U Fleku brewhouse, where we first met ten years ago. He has since travelled the world as a consultant, working in some of my favorite breweries in Japan.

Back on his native soil, he is flying the flag for classic, confident, Czech beer. His position is as a consultant. How long will he stay? Who will replace him when he wishes to wander? The St Norbert beers are an example that must not be diminished.

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Martin Matuska in the The Cloister Restaurant and Brewery

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