

Prague: twinned with Burton-upon-Trent

Having vandalised one of Britain's great ales a few years ago, the Bass brewing company now seems set on conserving one of the Czech's best lagers. It robbed us of the real Draught Bass but has now saved, and is selling in Britain, the true Staropramen (Old Spring) lager.

Draught Bass lost much of its soul when the company abandoned the open wooden casks in Burton-upon-Trent in which traditionally it had been fermented, and replaced them with closed vessels of stainless steel. Now Bass is paying a belated penance in Prague where it recently acquired a substantial stake in the Staropramen brewery. Bass is insisting upon the maintenance of "old-fashioned" open fermenters at Staropramen, and has blocked the Czech management's plan to install stainless steel.

The open fermentation system at Bass was more elaborate than that at Staropramen, but each conferred its own character on the beer. Such systems are hard to keep clean and are small as compared to modern steel vessels. The latter are more economic but produce less individualistic beers. Bass's penance should be welcomed by beer lovers.

Under Communism, the Czech breweries had the mixed blessing of benign neglect. Now, the Czechs are racing to be efficient capitalists, and some of their famous lagers face being turned into bland international-style brands. A drive for lower costs and higher volumes fails to recognise that the country's beers have a better future as quality products of a traditional and distinctive style than as entrants to the mass market. This is like turning the vineyards of chablis over to the production of liebfraumilch.

Czech beers have an extraordinarily long pedigree. Although brewing dates back at least to the Mesopotamians, its medieval history may have begun in what is now the Czech Republic then spread further west. Hops have been grown in Bohemia since at least AD 859 and became so famous that one of the several kings Wenceslas forbade the export of cuttings. The growing area around the town of Zatec has red, clay soil that maintains the ideal level of moisture, and hills that protect the hop vines from heavy rain and wind. The Zatec or Saaz variety of hop is still regarded as the world's most delicate.

Beer-making in the cities of Pilsen and Budweis dates from the 1200s from breweries in monasteries, and later in royal palaces. Those beers were dark or hazy, but in 1842 Pilsen produced the world's first bright, golden beer, using the lager method. It was the development of golden lager 150 years ago that sealed the Czechs' place in the history of beer.

Most of the present brewery buildings in the Czech Republic date from the 1800s, when the region was part of the Austrian Empire. Many have the classical lines and pedimented splendour of an official palace and most are set round a U-shaped, cobbled courtyard. In one wing, grains are sprouted on stone floors in vaulted chambers, before being kilned into malt. In the other, the finished malt meets spring water and hops in a decoratively tiled brew-house. Underneath the courtyard, the brew is fermented and lagered (matured).

In most beer-making countries, brewers have gradually stopped sprouting and kilning their own grain, leaving it instead to free-standing maltings. This means that the malt is not custom-made and the individuality of the beer suffers. Czech breweries continued to make their own, but are now following the rest of the world.

Staropramen and two other Prague breweries under the same ownership have a joint maltings in Prague. This still uses the floor method, said to produce a clean dryness not achieved by the employment of more modern techniques.

At the brewery, rather than meeting the water in a single infusion, the malt is subjected to a complex and costly process called "double decoction."

Staropramen is fermented with a two-strain yeast in square vessels made from concrete lined with paraffin wax and tiled in white. There are 150 of them, each holding 19,000 litres. The argument is that fermentation in these relatively shallow vessels naturally slows as the yeast falls to the bottom: it is a gentle process in which the full flavours of the beer are retained. In a tall vessel many times as large, the carbon dioxide developed during fermentation rises for tens of feet, purging the flavours as it goes, and the yeast is slow to drop.

Staropramen lager is notably soft and malty with a full but delicate flavour. This is the taste of a true lager. The famous Budvar, made in the city of Budweis is very similar, with a slightly more oily texture. The Budvar brewery began replacing its open fermenters with stainless steel, but stopped.

The American brew Budweiser took its name from the Czech town. If there was a single inspiration, it was the beer from the older Samson brewery named after the city's emblem. Samson, also known as Erste ("First") Budweiser, produces a slightly drier lager marketed in Britain as Zamek. The nearby town of Trebo makes a crisper lager called Regent which is also available in Britain in a dark version.

We in Britain now have a considerable range of Czech lagers, but they are just at the point where their traditions are threatened.

Where does this leave the most familiar example in Britain, Pilsner Urquell? This brewery has abandoned its famous wooden fermenters and lagering vessels and reduced its yeast from five strains to two. It is probably the world's best Pilsner, as well as being the original, but it is not as great a beer as it was. It has, notably, lost some of its complexity and its malty fullness of flavour.

Perhaps Pilsner Urquell needs the advice of a Western brewer who regrets his own acts of vandalism.

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