Herold Svelte

Much of the world is content to label some pretty ordinary beers as Pilsners, but the Czech Republic can hardly do that. It has, in the state of Bohemia, the city of Pilsen, with the original brewery - and can't start awarding the term to other towns, even if their beers are terrific.

This is something of a dilemma. Pilsen being in the Czech Republic, its style of beer is widely produced throughout the country, and often very well. The Czechs usually identify these beers simply by the word Svetle ("pale") and the rating 12°. Visitors often mistakenly think this refers to alcohol ("I had this great 12 per cent beer in Europe"), but that would make for a very rich, syrupy, sipping brew.

The number is a measure of the fermentable sugars in the beer, in the scale devised by the splendidly-named Carl Napoleon Balling. He was a Czech, but the Balling scale is also sometimes used by American brewers. The similar German Plato scale and the British system or original gravity are also used in the U.S. A beer of 12 degrees Balling or Plato would have an original gravity of 1048, and typically an alcohol content of around 3.6 to 4.0 per cent by weight, 4.5-5.0 by volume. Far from being especially strong, this is a typical strength for widely-consumed brews in many countries.

One such beer is the 12-degree Svetle from the Herold brewery, in Breznice. This is a small town near Pribram, in quarrying and mining country (granite, gold, silver, uranium), about 40 miles south of the Czech capital, Prague.

There has been a settlement at Breznice since the 1300s and a castle since at least 1415. The castle probably had facilities to make beer for the household and estate from the beginning, though the first reference to a brewery is not until 1506. The castle at that time was a Gothic structure, but the present buildings, in renaissance and baroque style, date from the late 1600s and early 1700s, and the Herold brewery is part of the site.

This southern part of the Czech Republic is dotted with castles that were outposts of the Kingdom of Bohemia, and defences against Austria and Hungary. They are now tourist attractions, in a region that is also popular for hiking, horseback riding and fishing in rivers and lakes,

The castle and brewery at Breznice has been owned by several noble families, and by the state during the Communist period. Being very small, it was used for a time by the National Institute for Malting and Brewing. The site includes an apartment for the head brewer and another for his retired predecessor. The latter, a flamboyant character of 82, comes from a brewing family that has extended to Austria, Brazil and Cleveland, Ohio.

After the collapse of Communism, state properties were gradually privatised, and the Breznice brewery was acquired two years ago by a consultant on transition economies, Charles Corry. He

is in his late 30s, and from Virginia. Corry, a soccer enthusiast, learned about the availability of the brewery through a friend in the sport.

Herold's beers had been known only locally, and the brewery must expand its distribution to survive in the new competitive environment. The beer is now in 20 pubs in Prague, and Corry is looking at export markets.

The range includes golden, amber and dark lagers variously at 10, 12, 13 and 14 degrees, and there have been experiments with specialities such as an Altbier and a wheat beer.

The brewery makes most of its own malt, in the Pilsner style, from local barley. Herold's Svelte has 25-27 units of bitterness. It is hopped three times. The aroma hop is the famous Bohemian variety Saaz. Fermentation is in open vessels, with yeast from Pilsner Urquell. Lagering of this beer is said to be for at least 60 days, more often 70.

Tasting note:
Creamy head. Full golden colour. Bright. Lightly herbal, flowery, lemony, hop aroma. Textured, creamy, malt background. Late hoppy dryness. A beautifully balanced beer of some delicacy.

Food pairings:
The hoppy dryness makes for a good aperitif. Or serve it like a Chardonnay, with fish. The lagers of South Bohemia often accompany freshwater fish, typically carp, from the local lakes. There are endless local recipes. Perhaps the favorite is to serve the fish in breadcrumbs.

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