

The family business is alive again

Where a grandfather once grew his own barley, a grandson now brews

"Would you mind climbing on to the roof? Good! Now, look across the fields to the church spire. Just to the left, you can see a derelict brewery. See the vents where they cooled the wort? My grandfather's grandfather established that place. It was called The Half Moon. When he came over here, he called this brewery The Sun."

I was in Belgium, where brewing is family. Emanuel De Landtsheer was in a reverie. We were at the brewery that has variously been known as The Sun (De Zon, in Flemish), The Mill (De Molen) and whose beer has most recently re-emerged with one of those Belgian self-mocking names that loosely translates as Misfortune (Malheur).

In the 1600s, when the historic abbey town of Dendermonde enforced its own local monopoly on brewing in East Flanders, there was "dry" territory until the first inn in the Duchy of Brabant. That first inn was The Sun, or maybe The Mill, a pub-brewery on the edge of the village of Buggenhout, on the main road from the hop town of Aalst to the important city of Mechelen (sometimes known by its French name, Malines).

"See those fields over there? My grandfather grew his own barley, and malted it himself." We wandered over to the maltings, in buildings set round a farm-style courtyard that looked to have changed little since the earliest days. The malting floor still had the typical Gothic arches, but now converted into an informal bar for guests. So far as I could see, there seemed to be three bars for guests in different parts of the brewery.

"Manu" De Landtsheer was warming to his theme. "My grandfather was also called Emmanuel. He was the son of a brewer. His wife was the daughter of a brewer. Emmanuel's brother was a brewer, too, in St Amands. My grandfather had strong opinions. He told me that most Belgian brewers made their beer too strong. If you wanted people to drink a lot of it, you must make it less heavy. The original beers were spontaneously-fermenting, and we still have the open cooler. The family made a kriek - our cherry orchard was in that over there, where that warehouse is.

"My grandfather was very keen on blending. He said you must always mix barleys and malts to iron out inconsistencies. Same with hops. He thought you should blend two harvests. Our family continued to grow hops for a long time, in that field over there."

The brewery closed just before World War II, but was left with a bottling contract for the national brewer Lamot. Horses were still used. "The draymen carried their money in satchels. One got so drunk that he nearly strangled himself with the strap when the horse moved suddenly. Like all

brewery horses, they knew their own way home. The drivers had to put nails into their shoes to stop them sliding on the snow in winter. They needed new nails every hour, and it took four hours to get to the Lamot brewery, in Mechelen."

Lamot was acquired by the yet-larger brewer Jupiler, then became part of Interbrew, the biggest national group in Belgium, and finally closed. In the meantime, the Landtsheer family had developed a beer wholesaling business. They had also become importers and distributors of Pilsner Urquell, which they brought from Bohemia in their own truck, painted with the legend: "The only original Pilsner in the whole world."

The family continued to grow hops until the 1970s. Manu, then in his late teens, remembers rushing home from school on his bike to help with the picking, and recalls the aroma in the oast as they were dried. He saw a lot of his grandfather, because his dad was out selling Pilsner Urquell - and was also the local mayor. "My father thought Pilsner Urquell and Westmalle were the best beers in the world. He had worked for a time at the abbey of Westmalle, and at the Eylenbsoch Lambic brewery.

"As I grew up, we all talked about re-opening our own brewery one day. When my father died in 1991, I decided I must make this dream true. We tried to acquire the old Half Moon brewery, then decided to do it here, on our own premises." The family received every encouragement from the Belgian campaigning organisation the Objective Beer-Tasters, of which Manu is a member. The local branch president, Mark Westijn, came to join me on my visit.

In front of the courtyard, the mansarded house of the family, still occupied by Manu's mother Monique and one of his sisters, Martine, is now linked by an entrance to a brand-new building. The latter, in a similar architectural style, houses mash-tun, kettles and fermenters. The stainless-steel, 25-hectolitre, brewhouse was supplied by the Belgian firm of Meura. The brewer is Luc Verhaegen, who worked at the famous De Koninck, in Antwerp, and more recently in Wieze, East Flanders, at Van Roy, which closed in April of 1997.

In July of '97, Malheur put in its first brew. For the moment, there is only one beer, of 1045-1047 (5.3 per cent alcohol by volume). This is a golden ale, made from three varieties of French barley (remember what grandad said?), malted in Aalst, Belgium. These are all Pilsner malts. A fourth, speciality, malt is also used. This has variously been Caravienne, Munich and Aromatic, as the brewer has experimented in developing the product. No sugar or adjuncts are used in the brewhouse. An infusion mash is employed, with town water that is medium soft.

The hops are Saaz, Styrians and Hallertau-Hersbruck, all as blossoms, in three additions. "Having grown and picked hops, we could hardly use pellets."

The yeast is from the nearby De Smedt brewery, known for its Affligem abbey ales. The beer is bottled at De Smedt, with a priming of pale candy sugar and a dosage of the same yeast. It is then brought back to Malheur for bottle-conditioning. There is also a draught version.

"We want to use basic, straightforward ingredients to make a fresh, lightly hoppy, refreshing ale that is easy to drink" (grandad again). "We think the draught is especially quaffable and the bottled version more soothing."

When I first tasted the beer, in Britain earlier this year, in the bottle, I was particularly struck by the Saaz hop accent. I also noticed a spiciness. Perhaps this was due to De Smedt's citric, perfumy, yeast, though the culture has been re-cropped at Malheur, and has gained its own character.

At the brewery, I found the bottled product very aromatic, rose-like and slightly oily. The draft had a more obviously orangey flavour and a big, fresh Saaz character.

This being Belgium, I was also asked to taste several vintages. At two months, the beer still had some yeasty sourness. At four, it was very assertive, with an almost stony, flinty, grassy, Saaz character. At eight, the oily, rosy characteristics were coming to the fore, and Manu thought he detected nuts and honey. I was not sure, but definitely found honey in flowery version of only 40 days that had been filled into a 75-centilitre bottle with a cork.

The label bears a number four. Why? "Four generations of brewers?" proposes Manu. "But surely there were more?" Perhaps, he suggests, it means that you can drink four without feeling drunk. "I don't know - I just wanted a number as part of the design." (Shades of Rolling Rock...?).

On the odd special occasion, the beer has been delivered by horse, and there may be more of that. Manu breeds Brabant horses, and has ten on the farm behind the brewery. "I have lots of ideas to make the beer better known, and to add more products, but we must not try to run before we can walk."

As he reminisced, he showed me photographs of his forbears. In one black-and-white print, a group of stern-looking men stood behind several children. One very small child was a boy in a smock. "That was my father." Manu had beamed and gesticulated through our tasting. Now his eyes clouded in reverie.

Published Online: AUG 18, 1999

Published in Print: NOV 1, 1998

In: All About Beer