

# Sweating up a suitable thirst

When I am feeling peckish I associate rye with bread made from that spicy-tasting grain, famously served in New York for lunch, topped with pastrami. If, on the other hand, I am feeling waspish, rye might evoke the grain's distilled manifestation, the cocktail whiskey that loosened tongues in the witty world of Dorothy Parker. As for juniper berries, they surely belong in gin, the lubricant (in my experience, anyway) of a more baleful humour.

So what are rye and juniper doing in a new beer to be announced by Whitbread next week? This is no April Fool's jest, waspish, baleful or even wry. Whitbread's new brew will be an English ale of conventional strength but rye (a grain grown especially in Central and Eastern Europe) and juniper (prolific in the former Yugoslavia and Italy) have a robust tradition in beer.

The tribes that spread from Central Europe (perhaps from the region that is now Hungary), to become the Estonians and Finns use these ingredients to create an ancient style of strong brew that is sometimes made in the sauna and frequently consumed there.

We British may bracket the sauna with Turkish baths or spas, but in Estonia and Finland its role is closer to that of the pub. There, the real thing is not some electrically heated, bathroom-like facility: it is a smoke-tilled cabin in the woods by a lake. Inside, a stone hearth contains a birch fire. This is topped with stones which retain heat until water is thrown on to them to make steam.

The sauna is sometimes a multi-purpose room in which meats can be smoked, bread baked and beer brewed. After a long, lingering dinner, the company can repair to the sauna to sweat out their excesses, become covered in soot, beat each other with birch twigs then jump into the lake to cool and cleanse themselves.

After emerging from the waters, the party then sits outdoors, drinking rye-and-juniper beer and watching the sun reluctantly and briefly sink below the horizon. This is the time for contemplation, conversation and lugubrious Nordic humour. "Behind your executive desk, or in your designer suit you may be a big man," a towel-clad companion once explained to me. "Here, you are naked. You are just another guy. Here, have another beer." Then he told me a story about walking through the woods and hearing explosions. Someone had lit the fire to heat the stones in his sauna (they take four hours to reach the required temperature), but the flames had licked too far. The empty sauna cabin had caught fire. The explosions were caused by the bursting of bottles of beer in the changing-room.

The tradition of beer at the sauna is strongest in Finland. There, rye-and-juniper beer is known as soro or, more often, sahti. The first name may be derived from the Hungarian word for beer, sor.

Rye-and-juniper beer is made on a domestic scale by hundreds of farmhouse brewers in rural areas to the north and west of Helsinki. The town of Lammi has a museum jointly devoted to sahti-brewing and the former local industry: the cultivation of flax for the making of linen.

Lammi also has the best known among the four or five commercial brewers of sahti.

The commercial production of sahti is a development of the past five or 10 years. It is a small craft industry in the hands of young enthusiasts who want Finland to follow other Western countries in reviving local traditions of food and drink.

In Helsinki, I have enjoyed commercially produced sahti with a rather stodgy dish comprising fish cooked inside a loaf of bread, at a young people's bar called Zetor in which the principal items of decor were farm tractors. I felt I had strayed into the set of a foreign-language production of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

In Lammi, I have seen both commercially produced and farmhouse sahti being made. The commercial producer, who also had a smallholding growing vegetables for her local market, used adapted dairy tanks for her sahti. The farmhouse brewer used wooden vessels in a multipurpose log cabin.

The two versions of sahti were very similar. The principal grain used is barley malt, but a small proportion of rye adds a distinctly grainy spiciness, almost a minty quality. An infusion of these grains is filtered through a bed of rye straw and juniper twigs, complete with berries. A small proportion of hops is also used. Bakers yeast is employed, and the fermentation and maturation take just under a fortnight.

The finished product has an orange-to-russet colour and is cloudy. It has only a gentle carbonation like that in an ale served directly from the cask behind the bar at an English country pub. Its aroma has notes of walnuts and bananas developing to berry fruits. These characteristics derive partly from the type of yeast used. In the palate, juniper flavours and smokiness develop. The texture is smooth and slightly oily.

I have on more than one occasion suffered the heat, steam, smoke and birching in the sauna, and the cold water of the lake, to drink this beer. It feels enwrapping and soothing, and its high alcohol (7.0-9.0 per cent) warms the heart as the sun sinks.

Gradually, the spicy notes in the beer arouse the appetite. In a rack in the wall of the sauna eggs have been left to hard-boil in the smoke and steam. Even when peeled, they are black, but smokily delicious. More sahti. More eggs. Can it be? Yes - the sun is rising again. We are eating breakfast.

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