The abbey habit

The only Belgian Trappists not to brew beer have succumbed to the demon drink.

The most exciting news in decades for beer-lovers from the serene world of monastic brewing: a new Trappist brewery is to fire its kettles. This is surely interesting news in the ecclesiastical world, too. I have in recent years heard of several monasteries selling their breweries, wineries or distilleries, but none starting such ventures anew.

The new brewery will be at the Trappist monastery of Achel, dating from 1854, in the north of Belgium, just across the border from the Dutch city of Eindhoven. (Less happily, the nearby Dutch monastic ale brewery of Schaapskooi, the only one in The Netherlands, is risking its Trappist status by discussing joint ownership with a local commercial lager-brewer).

In Belgium, Achel has for three-quarters of a century been the only Trappist monastery without a brewery. It had one until the First World War, but its copper kettles were confiscated by the invading Germans, probably for use in munitions. Such stories are commonplace in Belgium, and the memories still rankle, though the Trappists are silent on the subject.

In recent years, the abbey has supported itself by growing and selling vegetables and fruit. Now, it has sold some of its wooded land for around £300,000 to raise money for the new brewery. A cowshed at the abbey is being converted into a pub, and the beer will initially be available only there.

"Monastic life is about simplicity, quality and strength, so beer is the most suitable product for an abbey," says Brother Titus, a member of the Achel community. Like all of the other Trappist brews, the new one from Achel will be an ale, not a lager. Although either type of beer can be made at any strength, Brother Titus considers most lagers to be "no better than a decent glass of water"

The consultant brewer on the project is Brother Thomas, now in his 70s and notionally retired, who is known to beer-lovers the world over for the beers he nurtured at his former Trappist abbey, Westmalle, near Antwerp. At Westmalle, the monks drink a golden ale of "Single" strength, while consumers are offered a darker, stronger "Double" and an even more potent, golden, hugely aromatic, dryish, "Triple", at 9.0 per cent alcohol by volume. This last has become so famous that the term "Triple" is now almost always associated in Belgium with a beer modelled on it.

Despite his life of denial, Brother Thomas once memorably informed me that Westmalle Triple was the only beer to drink with asparagus.

For the moment, the monks of Achel have Westmalle "Single" at their own meal-table. Soon, they will have their own beer...

All of the true Trappist ales are available in Britain, though some are extremely hard to find, especially the malty, warming, brews of Westvleteren, near Poperinge and Ypres. Many devotees pop over to buy the latter at the abbey's own shop. The chocolatey brews from Rochefort, near Namur, are also rare, though the spicy ones from Chimay are quite easy to find. So is the astonishingly hoppy, dry, aperitif, Orval, from the Belgian province of Luxembourg. Orval's present brewery, built in the 1920s and '30s, is the currently the "youngest" among the Trappists, but it is also the oldest, in that Cistercians probably bewed on the site earlier, and perhaps Benedictines as early as1070.

Several of these Trappist beers would be in any list of the world's greatest brews. Nothing quite so distinctive has emerged from the monasteries that have their beer made by secular commercial breweries. Nonetheless, some of these so-called "abbey" beers are an accessible introduction to this family of strong, complex, brews.

The Norbertine brothers of Leffe, near Dinant, on the Meuse, makes tisanes from herbs grown in their garden (which dates from 1152), but they also licence the Stella Artois and Hoegaarden breweries to make a range of beers. Perhaps the most widely known is Leffe Blonde (6.6 abv), which has a distinctly citric note. Such flavours come not from added fruits but from natural compounds created in fermentation to high strengths. Leffe Brown, at a similar strength, has suggestions of apples, brown sugar, and sappy oakiness. Leffe Triple is golden, with cedary, rose-like notes and a strength of 8. 4. The equally strong, dark, Radieuse (the name referring to a saint's halo) is like a beery cherry brandy.

Several Trappist ales, and the Leffe abbey beers, are available nationally in Britain in the130-pub Hogshead chain. There even better Belgian selections at some independents, famously the White Horse, Parson's Green. Two of my recent discoveries are The Dove (Broadway Market, Hackney, London) and Den Engel ("The Angel") in St Edward St, Leek, Staffordshire.

Belgian beer of the week

On my most recent visit to Belgium, I was dazzled by the finesse and creamy complexity of Karmeliet, a new abbey-style golden Triple (8.0abv) from the Bosteels brewery, at the unpromisingly-named village of Buggenhout, between Brussels and Ghent. This beer is inspired by a brew said to have been made in the 1600s by a Carmelite abbey in nearby Dendermonde. The new Karmeliet is brewed from barley, wheat and oats, each in both raw and malted forms. The very orangey Styrian hops of Slovenia are used, and there is a heavy (coriander-accented?) spicing. The brewery's house yeast gives a touch of vanilla, and the beer finishes with a lemony dryness. This beautiful brew is available in Britain at Safeway.

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