

Herold Bohemian Black Lager

The Czechs are famous for the golden lagers of Pilsen and Budweis, but also have a history of dark versions. Some have a dark red hue, and a nutty malt accent, and are typically identified as "garnet". Others have always been closer to black, richer and spicier in flavour, sometimes with a suggestion of licorice. The most famous in that vein is the house beer at U Fleku, the 15th-century brewpub in Prague.

I have been pleased to notice more beers emerging in this style, not only in the Czech Republic but elsewhere. I have seen the term Prager used to indicate the Czech style of dark lager in one brewpub in Vienna and another in Tokyo.

In the Czech Republic, one brewery doing great work for the style is Herold.

Herold Black is made from a starting gravity of 13.1-13.2 (1053). Pilsner, crystal, Munich and black malts are used. Some of the Pilsner malt is made at the brewery. A double decoction mash is employed. The brew has an unusually long boil, and it is hopped three times, entirely with the Saaz variety. Lagering is for 75-80 days. The beer emerges with 5.2 per cent alcohol by volume (4.1 by weight).

It has collected first prize two years running in Bohemia's annual judging, and has had similar success as far away as Stockholm, Sweden. In Britain, this lager has even been presented in a cask, as though it were an ale.

Tasting note: Dark brown to black. Dense creamy head. Oily richness. Flavors reminiscent of bittersweet chocolate. Some sappy bitterness. Long, cedary, dry, smoky. finish.

Food pairings: In describing a good beer, the Czechs use the expression chlebnatost, "full-breadedness". What a great description. This style of "black" lager is served with chunky dark bread and a generous dollop of cream cheese at U Fleku. It's pretty good with marinated meats like brisket, in dark sauces: Austrian Tafelspitz or German Sauerbraten. And have another with your post-prandial cigar.

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