

Trad ale in Finland keeps its Pedda up

World's oldest beer style is back - thanks to a Lammi vegetable grower

The Lambic of Belgium surely represents the oldest style of beer to have remained continuously in commercial production - dating back to Bruegel and beyond - but it has a rival in antiquity farther north in Europe.

Finland's juniper-spiced sahti, which I described last month, is almost certainly older, though its sale ceased during the country's period of Prohibition (1917-1932), and for decades seemed unlikely to be restored.

Now it is once more commercially available: in Finland's Alko chain of state-monopoly liquor stores, in three-litre containers much like those used for "wine-in-a-box."

The man who pioneered the revival of this most traditional beer as a professional product, Pekka Kaariainen, thus challenged the monopolistic tendencies of the country's Big Three brewers - Hartwall, Sinebrychoff and Olvi - whose principal products are very light lagers.

Pekka, who grew up in the sahti heartland around the town of Lammi (about 100 miles north-east of Helsinki), started to home-brew this style of beer when he was 14.

Later, on the family's small holding, he grew potatoes and carrots for sale at local markets, then went to business school.

Pekka's thesis was on the economics of producing and selling sahti.

In order to substantiate the economics outlined in his thesis, he had brewed 200-litre batches of sahti, and he decided to seek permission from AJko to sell it commercially.

In a country with very rigid regulations concerning alcohol, it seemed unlikely that his request would be met.

"It came as a big surprise when they said yes," recalls Pekka.

"I just heard one day: 'Today, we are granting you a licence. You may start production immediately.'

Pekka brews in a restored cowshed at the farm where he was born, in the country near Lammi.

The pine buildings, set among maples and fir and by a lake, are two or three hundred years old.

His student brews, and his first commercial batches were mashed in a vessel designed to prepare soup in restaurants.

He later moved up to a 2,500-litre vessel bought second-hand from a cheese dairy.

Financing came from 60-odd shareholders, most of them sahti-fanciers, and the Ministry for the Environment.

He obtains from a commercial maltings a milled blend of barley and rye, which he mashes over juniper in the traditional manner.

A hop tea is added, and the wort is sterilised in a heat-exchanger, but not boiled.

A proportion of production is sold as wort, to be fermented by home-producers, and the rest is marketed either in five-litre plastic bottles to restaurants or in the "boxes" to Alko stores.

Pekka's sahti is notably for its nutty, fruity flavours.

There are now four other producers, some of whom give their versions a more distinct rye character, and some rely solely on juniper as a seasoning, omitting hops.

There are also a further three or four producers who make only wort.

These days, Pekka's brewery is largely run by his wife Sirpa. She also continues the vegetable business, and the two have a young family.

"I am a slave," she laughs, at least half in jest. The two grew up only a mile apart, but did not begin their relationship until they met at someone else's wedding.

Their next venture might be to open a sahti pub in one of the farm buildings if the law can be changed to allow that.

For the moment, their entertaining centres on a sahti-and-crayfish party every year in July.

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