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# How A Tiny Brewery Run By Monks Came To Make The Best Beer In The World



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The Trappist monks at The Abbey of Saint Sixtus of Westvleteren, Belgium, aren't in the business of brewing beer for the riches or glory — they brew only enough to support themselves and their abbey.



*YouTube/Casper van Dort*

But fame found them anyway in the mid-2000s, when the beer-information website [RateBeer.com](http://RateBeer.com) named their dark, quadrupel-style 12 the best beer in the world.

RateBeer executive director Joe Tucker, who put together the beer ranking based on reviews from the site's users, said he had no idea how much of an impact it would have on the abbey/brewery, collectively known as Westvleteren. The brewery had also been declared the best brewer in the world on the site's [first annual list](#) of the World's Best Brewers back in 2002, but no one had paid much attention.

"One day, 20 people were there drinking the beer," Tucker told Business Insider. "The next, there's a huge line of cars waiting to buy it." A Belgian TV station even captured footage of a fistfight that broke out in the line.

The beer that no one had heard of had suddenly skyrocketed in popularity. Tucker got a phone call from Westvleteren soon after, and the monks weren't happy. Thanks to Tucker's list, they told him, the public was demanding more beer. The monks "were not going to make it," Tucker said. "Beer's usually a business; there's a market for it, but the monks don't see it that way."



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Five monks work in the brewery, with another five helping on bottling days.

## A Small Operation

Of the [10 Trappist monasteries](#) that produce beer, Westvleteren produces the least: just under 4,000 barrels, or 126,000 gallons, a year. The largest, Chimay, produces about 3.2 million gallons a year.

The abbey began brewing beer around 1839, and it started selling to the public in 1931, author and photographer [Charles "Chuck" Cook](#), who specializes in Belgian beer, told Business Insider. The recipe has changed very little since then.

The abbey brews about 70 days a year, starting at about 9 a.m. and finishing at about 5 p.m. Five monks work in the brewery, and an additional five help on bottling days.

Cook, who is one of few non-monks to have gone inside the Westvleteren brewery, is particularly well acquainted with its beer. He has had all three of its brews — the 8 and the 12, both dark ales, and the Blond, a 5.8% ABV (alcohol by volume) Belgian blond ale. He has even tried one that had been aged since 1969.

So does Cook think it is the best in the world?

"There's a lot of great strong, dark beers in Belgium — there's the Rochefort 10, the St. Bernardus Abt," he said. "There are numerous beers that are dark and strong and start at 10, 11, 12% [ABV]. But [for Westvleteren], when you throw in the taste, A, and B, [the fact] it's brewed by monks, and C, the 'scarcity factor,' that's a lot of it."



*YouTube/Casper van Dort*

Beer picked up at the gate must be reserved at least 60 days ahead of time.

## The 'Scarcity Factor'

The "scarcity factor": This is the grail at the center of Westvleteren-mania. Not only does Westvleteren produce the least of all the Trappist breweries, but its beer is also the hardest to get.

The beer is available at either the abbey's In De Vrede cafe (by the glass or by the six-pack, with a limit to two six-packs per person) or at the drive-thru pick-up gate (with a limit of one case per car, which must be reserved at least 60 days ahead of time over the "beer phone" ... but good luck getting through the line, which receives **as many as 85,000 calls** an hour).



The abbey, I should mention, is not easy to reach. I went there in December 2013 on a day trip from Brussels. The easiest way is to rent a car and drive the hour and a half west to Westvleteren; otherwise you'll have to take a bus to another bus to another bus to another bus — a nine-hour public transit nightmare. But even if you drive, as I did, turning onto barely marked and barely paved country roads, it's hard to find.

Once you're there, though, it's like arriving at some mythical place. And it's beautiful. The beer, which I tried at the cafe, is truly phenomenal: dark, raisin-y, a bit oaky, and, at about 11% ABV, very strong. It is complex and warming, and absolutely delicious.



## The 'Gray Market'

Westvleteren 12 sells for 40 euros a case — less than \$2 a beer — which is pretty inexpensive for the best beer in the world. But again, the monks aren't looking to make a profit on the operation.

However, because the beer is available only at the monastery, a so-called gray market has emerged online in which people try to resell bottles they bought at the abbey for \$50 or more per bottle. The monks discourage reselling of their beer, and Joe Tucker keeps an eye out on RateBeer's user forums to shut down any attempted resells of Westvleteren beer, but it still happens from time to time.

So why not make more beer? It may cause the beer to lose its appeal, especially if it were made more widely available, Cook said, adding that even so, Westvleteren would "have a great beer and a great reputation regardless."

And the abbey is fiercely against it. "We are no brewers. We are monks. We brew beer to be able to afford to be monks," according to a statement from the Father abbot on the abbey's [website](#). Increasing production, except as a means to live, goes against their beliefs.



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According to Benedictine law, monks "are truly monastic when they live by the labor of their hands."

## 'They Sell to Live'

Westvleteren 12 is again on [RateBeer's 2015 list](#) of the best beers in the world, which is no surprise after all these years, though the monks are still a little overwhelmed by the publicity. Of all the breweries in the world, and of all the beers made by all the breweries in the world, imagine being rated the best. It is an enormous title that most brewers can only dream about. Still, the monks are humble. They didn't set out to make the best beer in the world, but they do.

It's hard to say whether the abbey is proud of the title, though Brother Godfried, who is in charge of the brewery, once told [Reuters](#): "It's good to know our customers appreciate what we make."

"They sell to live; they don't live to sell," Cook said, adding it was "not something you would *not* be proud of, I should say."

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