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/// BELGIAN BEER TOUR 2015



Belgian Beer Tour 2015
Celebrator Readers Gather in Belgium
 Article: Tom Dalldorf

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The flight from California to Brussels is grueling, but the reward is that you arrive in Belgium, land of world-class beer, brewing and beer service. Some 28 beer enthusiasts joined us on the *Celebrator* Belgian Beer Tour, held April 22–26, 2015, and organized by the capable and well-traveled beer geek Stu Stuart of Belgium Beer Me! Tours.

We gathered in Brugge (Bruges, for the French and English speakers), an amazingly well preserved and picturesque medieval city of just over 20,000 people in the city center, with seemingly a pub or good beer venue on every corner. The historic city is a UNESCO World Heritage site that was serendipitously protected from German bombing by its distant location (10 miles from the North Atlantic) and tiny, tank-unfriendly bridges.

Brugge is a canal-based commercial city similar to Amsterdam and Stockholm. It is often referred to as “the Venice of the North.” But Brugge is also a formidable beer destination, with several breweries and a gaggle of classic “cafés” all featuring extensive beer lists worthy of perusing at your leisure (preferably over a beer).

Our group of beer seekers gathered along one of the many canals in the charming courtyard of the Hotel Bourgoensch Hof for the hike to our tour bus, which would take us to our first brewery: the Saint Sixtus Abbey, home of Trappist Westvleteren, considered by many to be the producer of one of the greatest beers in the world, Westvleteren 12. Talk about starting at the top.

The brewery itself is not open to the public, but its tasting room and restaurant called In de Vrede, or “In the Peace,” proved to be a charmingly idyllic venue for beer appreciation. Situated in the rural farmlands of West Flanders, the abbey restaurant had a large outdoor patio with lots of tables for the exclusive use of our group. We were greeted with a picnic table laden with 28 glasses of Westvleteren beers. Welcome to Belgium.

I’m sure a twenty-something hipster marketing monk could send Westvleteren sales through the roof, but the good brothers are content with making the amount of beer they do and then cutting off sales when the beer is gone. There’s a concept. Cars line up in the morning and can buy up to two cases of beer a day until the beer stock is depleted. The abbey frowns on people buying the scarce beer and reselling it, especially on the Internet, and is now much more proactive in policing abuse of this reasonable policy. There were no worries on that account with our group. We were buyers and keepers. Okay, and drinkers too.

All of our meals were preordered and were served upon arrival along with all three of the beers made at the abbey. The Blonde (green cap) was a yeasty pale ale coming in at 5.8% abv. The Westvleteren 8 (blue cap) was dark, rich and robustly malty and, at 8% abv, was a favorite to accompany our lunch. The Westy 12 (pardon the familiarity), at 10.2% abv, was amazingly rich and delicious, as one would expect from a beer considered by many to be the best beer in the world. Stu, ever watchful, made sure the beers just kept coming, much to the delight of our group. Before long, a rustic wagon-trailer clattered by, pulled by three white Belgian draft horses. Stu thinks of everything.

We returned to Brugge, sated and satisfied that we had gotten our fill of the magnificent Westy beers — something few beer geeks can say or even contemplate.

After a free afternoon of exploring beer in Brugge, we met at the hotel restaurant for dinner (again, preordered) with a fabulous collection of beers to choose from to accompany the delightful cuisine. Although the beers just kept coming, many in the group took off after dinner to explore the city at night, paying visits to classic Belgian beer cafés like ‘t Brugs Beertje and many others. Had we died and gone to beer heaven? Oh, yes...

Day two did not require a tour bus. We took a walking tour of Brugge, stopping at the delightful De Halve Maan (The Half Moon) brewery and museum for a tour and tasting.

None of Belgium is what we Westerners would call “handicap-accessible,” but the De Halve Maan facility, established in the 16th century but modernized when the Maes family took it over in 1856, provided a real challenge for some of us. There were more than 200 stairs to climb, some of which were steeply pitched, with very low doorways adding to the degree of difficulty. The reward was getting to the top floors, going out onto the roof and overlooking the city of Brugge. Breathtaking. While taking in the 360-degree view, the tallest buildings one could see were, of course, the church steeples.

Much of the old brewery has been turned into a delightful museum, but the brewhouse is a distinctly modern, highly

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functional stainless steel beauty. The beers produced are amazing, including the Straffe Hendrik golden tripel, with serious hop character, and the dark brown quadrupel, richly deep and complex. Outstanding among them, however, was the limited Heritage Wild beer served to us on arrival in the dining room. This beer is available only once a year. We win. A buffet lunch was provided, and Stu made sure the beers just kept coming. We were getting spoiled.

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The afternoon was spent exploring and taking rides on the canal boats for hire. There is no better way to see the city than from a boat on one of the myriad canals.

Day three found us on another bus heading for the historic university city of Ghent, which produced some inspired but unprintable limericks, among other things. Along the way we visited Brewery Contreras, a small, family-owned farmhouse brewery established in 1818. The father still lives across the road, and his daughter

and her husband now operate the brewery. The Valeir tripel was a big hit with our group, but the charming family operation was the bigger hit, resulting in lots of purchases of beer and what passes for brewery swag in such an artisanal setting.

Our visit to Ghent offered cathedrals both spiritual and temporal, the latter filled with wonderful beer, naturally. Lunching in a centuries-old pub and restaurant alongside a canal was most memorable. The food, beer and service never failed to impress.

On day five, we bid a fond farewell to Brugge and headed toward Brussels and ultimately Leuven, just west of Brussels. Our brewery stop along the way was yet another amazing look at the development of Belgian brewing.

We arrived at the Duvel Moortgat brewery, a large but still quaint collection of old buildings and huge modern fermentation tanks. Still family-owned, Duvel Moortgat is now a collection of breweries under one roof featuring Duvel, Maredsous, Achouffe, Vedett, De Koninck and some cellar treasures from Liefmans. All of these beers were available at the tasting room. Smiles all around.

Duvel has a new beer and a new package. The new beer seems to be inspired by all the West Coast hoppy beers finding favor with beer cognoscenti. Who would have expected the new Duvel Tripel Hop beer? Remember when Belgian brewers aged hops so as not to get any untoward aromas? That would not be true of Duvel Tripel Hop.

Tiny 18-centiliter bottles of Duvel were gifted to us after the tour and tasting. Cute and most practical for an 8.5% beer. The brewery said that sales of the tiny new Duvel bottles were very good.

Our next stop took us to rural Brewery De Kroon for a dinner and tasting. We were honored to have an up-close and personal talk by brewery owner Freddy Delvaux, who earned his Ph.D. in 1972 and is an expert on brewing science, quality control and recipe creation. He created a laboratory of brewing science at the University in Leuven, where he worked until his recent retirement. His son Filip was awarded a Ph.D. for his studies on Belgian witbier, and he has worked at the university lab for 15 years himself. The beers, oddly enough, were pristine. Our entire group was seated at one long table, and the beers kept coming.

Evening in Leuven was spent exploring the many beer opportunities of the university city while a slight drizzle was coming down. We were hoping for better weather for our visit to the Zythos Beer Festival the next day. Gambrinus continued to smile upon the *Celebrator* group, with no rain at the festival, which was held outside Leuven in an industrial park. The festival itself was in a very large exhibition hall called Brabantthal, filled with over a hundred booths arranged so that ample room was left for wandering around to find your next great beer epiphany.

There were so many classic Belgian breweries in attendance that it was hard to branch out and try new or unknown breweries. But our group was curious and resourceful. And, as is the case at any beer festival, the buzz among our group created a "Have you tried such-and-such beer?" to keep interest up.

Had we died and gone to beer heaven? Oh, yes...

Since Brussels is just a few hours from London via the Chunnel, it was no wonder that a few English beer authorities were in attendance. Steve from CAMRA and Tim Webb, coauthor with Steve Beaumont of *The World Atlas of Beer*, among many other books, took the time to tutor our group on beers not to be missed. We spent some time in front of Brewery de la Lienne and chatted with the brewers (most of whom were proficient in English) about some of their offerings, including a double IPA and a barley wine aged in whisky barrels. Where do these Belgian brewers get such wacky ideas?

The Zythos Festival is an embarrassment of great brewing (okay, there were not a few clunkers among the treasures) and should be on every beer lover's bucket list to attend at least once in a lifetime.

The Leuven transit system proved most efficient in getting our group out of the festival grounds and back to our hotel in downtown Leuven. One more night of pub crawling (after the fest!), and our group was ready to either return to the U.S. or continue on to other beery adventures. The Wild & Spontaneous Beer Tour was pulling some of our group.

Many thanks to Stu Stuart and Belgian Beer Me! for making the arrangements and getting us safely around unfamiliar locales that are now in our group's palate memory forever.



The tour group took time for a quick group photo at the train station



Westvleteren signpost



Westvleteren glass



Duvel hospitality building



Duvel Tripel Hop



On tour at Duvel with headsets



Tour group at Brugs Beertje



Cynthia, Vic and Stu at Halve Maan



Museum at Halve Maan



Bierhaus in Ghent



Group lunch at De Kroon



Vic and Cynthia Kralj at Trappist in Brugge



Tim Web (center) gives grad seminar at Zythos

Tom Dalldorf is publisher and editor of the *Celebrator Beer News*.

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