

## A seasonal search for the phantom of brewing

The Belgian man-in-the Street (or rue) is probably knowledgeable about beer than his counterpart in other countries. Despite that, he is still inclined to take for granted the marvelous beer selection in his *own land*.

The integrity of several Belgian beer styles is in danger and some could vanish. Perhaps the most endangered is the **Saison**.

This style is not widely known outside its region of production of Hainaut, in the French speaking half of the country.

It was my interest in this style that led me to make my first visit to the **Dupont brewery**. This is in the hamlet of Tourpes, in the municipality of Leuze, in western Hainaut.

The making of Saisons was regarded as a distinctly Belgian technique by brewing scientists in the late 1800s and early 1900s, though they were produced to meet a situation common to all brewing nations. They were originally made during the winter by farmer-brewers, then laid down for consumption during the summer. The beer had to be sturdy enough to last for some months, but not too strong to be a summer and harvest quencher.

Rocky Saisons were regarded in Belgium as beers of medium gravity (today, anything from 1048 to 1080). The method, probably arrived at empirically, was to use **high mashing temperatures**, producing a substantial degree of unfermentable sugars, and to have a period of warm conditioning, usually in metal tanks. In the Belgian tradition, Saisons are top-fermenting and bottle-conditioned. These beers are often presented in Champagne-style bottles, and were before the more widespread revival of this presentation. They often have an orangey colour, and usually a dense, rocky, head. Their aroma is often fruity and yeasty, perhaps even powdery. They have a refreshing carbonation and crispness (some are made with quite hard water) and a fruitiness, often with citric notes. They are usually well-hopped, typically with Belgian or British varieties. Traditionally, dry-hopping was common. some are spiced.

I have always thought of Saison Dupont as a down-to-earth classic of the style, and I was excited about visiting the brewery. This part of Belgium is rural, but fringing on the old industrial area called the Borinage.

There are fields of sugar beet but the red-brick of the building can look careworn, sometime with chipped whitewash, and there are ads painted on the gable-ends, as they would be in France.

The town sign for Leuze bears the legend "ville au trois brasseries" (town of three breweries). In Leuze, the three breweries are **Dupont**, **A Vapeur** (making superbly spicy Saisons), and **Dubuisson** (whose Bush Beer resembles an English barley wine). Within the municipality, the latter two are in the village of Pipaix.

Finding the breweries is another question. On a country road, a cafe called Caves Dupont caught my eye. Directly opposite, a scatter of brick buildings, pantiled, and looking like a farm, proved to be the brewery.

It dates from 1850, and since 1920 has been in the Dupont family. The original Dupont's grandson, Marc Rosier, runs the brewery, and owns it with his two sisters.

A figure of St. Arnold, the patron saint of Belgian brewers, is set into the wall in one part of the brewery, and he appears in a small statue in one of the doorways.



Hop vines grow to a height of 15-20 feet.



St. Arnold, the patron of brewers.

Inside, the equipment is still much as it was when the brewery began: a cast-iron, open mash tun, and a flat-topped copper in an agricultural building.

With a matter-of-factness that matched his farmer-like appearance and gait, M. Rosier answered my question about his procedures. Each question was answered, but without much elaboration.

He told me that he used only pale malt in Saison Dupont, that his **water was hard**, and that the hops were mainly **Kent Goldings**, with some **Hallertaus**. He made two additions in the kettle, but no longer dry-hopped. When I first tasted these beers, about 15 years ago, I thought they had even more character, and perhaps that was why.

M. Rosier said that, after primary fermentation, there was a week or two of warm-conditioning in a metal tank. This was followed by centrifuging, re-yea sting (with a different culture), priming, and a good fortnight of maturation in bottle.

He felt that his beers were best at between three and eight weeks after leaving the brewery, but said some customers preferred them at six months.

When he opened a bottle for me to taste, the cork flew through the air.

No sooner had one bottle appeared than another would be fetched. "Taste this," M. Rosier would suggest, every time I sought to probe the secrets of his beer.

"In your view, just how should a Saison taste?" I would demand. "It must be a good, honest beer. It should have character. It is essential that it has soul," he would reply, with Gallic imprecision. "Here ... try this one." In their house character, Dupont's beers are full of life. with a rocky, creamy, head; a sharp, refreshing, attack; a restrained fruitiness; and a long, very dry, finish.

The range includes Saison Dupont itself, subtitled *Vieille Reserve*, at 1050; a vaguely organic version, described on the label as *Biohogique*; and stronger pale and dark beers under the name *Moinette* (the dark, or *Brune*, has four malts). M. Rosier lives on a farm called *Moinette*. In French, *Moine* means monk, and the farm is believed to be on what was once an abbey estate.

Between the hoppy, dry, *Moinette Blonde* and the perfumy, sweeter *Brune*, is *La Bieje de Beloeil*, dedicated to a nearby castle. There was once a brewery at *Beloeil*, producing a beer called *Saison Roland*. Today, there is a *Roland Triple Saison*, from the *Lefebvre* brewery, at *Quenast*, across the provincial border in *Brabant*.

The Dupont brewery has also made a softer, fruitier beer, with its grist comprising one-third malted wheat, under the Latin name *Cerevisia*. This is dedicated to a Gallo-Roman site in the area.

Besides Dupont *A Vapeur* and *Lefebvre*, there are other breweries producing *Saisons*. In the province of *Hainaut*, the breweries *Voisin* and *Silly* (it sounds sensible enough in French) use the term - *Saison*, and *Allard* makes similar beers without this designation. In the province of *Namur*, the bigger brewery *Du Bocq* has the most widely available example, *Saison Regal*.

In the Belgian province of *Luxembourg*, in the *Ardennes* village of *Soy*, a new micro-brewery called *Fantome* is making very fruity, strong, seasonal beers in loosely this style.

At the *Fantome* brewery, I tasted a soft, sweetish, 1076 version made with a dash of strawberry juice. At the associated *Ferme au Chene* brewpub, in nearby *Durbuy*, I tasted a similar beer, called *Markloff*, with a maltier character.

Perhaps these breweries will in the future have a crack at a classic *Saison*. The style needs all the help it can get.

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