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Tasting of dark trappist beers

Whoever says "trappist", often unconsciously thinks of dark and strongly alcoholic beers. There are, of course, also blond trappist beers, but these are much younger than their dark counterparts. Orval for instance, was brewed for the first time in 1931, Westmalle Triple in 1936, and the Chimay Triple (white crown cap) in 1960 !

After the tasting of the blond trappist beers (Beer Passion Magazine Nr. 7, p.16-20) it is only natural that now the dark



The tasing panel

ones are given a chance as well. Where-else could this take place in a better way than in the oldest Belgian trappist abbey 'Onze-Lieve-Vrouw' in Westmalle. Although some abbeys were founded earlier (Orval in 1070, Rochefort in 1230), Westmalle was the first abbey resuming the thread of monastic life after the abolition of monasteries on 1 September 1796. So the first real trappist beer was brewed in Westmalle after Napoleon's fall in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and after the expulsion of the Dutchmen in 1830.

The monks did not exactly start using the mashing fork yesterday. The oldest written proof that beer was brewed inside an abbey dates back to 820, when the monks of Sankt Gallen already brewed three different kinds of beer. The monks, by the way, did not see beer as a stimulant, but as real foodstuff. Especially during Lent, good and heavy beer was important for the monks to enable them to have a nice Easter celebration without too much loss of weight.

Therefore, monks' beer was pre-eminently heavy, dark beer. In the dark malt, which is used to brew this kind of beer, a lot of sugars become impossible to ferment because of the heating and so, they stay in the beer.

Not only the Trappists used the mashing fork. Benedictines, Cistercians, Norbertines, ... were brewers as well. During the French occupation, this age-old monastic tradition came to an end: on 1 September 1796, all religious institutions, monasteries, abbeys and priories were abolished.

From then onwards it was waiting for Belgium! Only after 1830, monastic life recommences and on 10 December 1836, the monks of Westmalle taste their home produced beer for the first time. Nevertheless, only the Trappist monks restored to honour the age-old tradition of brewing beer.



The tasting panel

In the future museum of Westmalle trappist brewery, 17 members of the tasting panel took place: representatives of the trappist monks (Jan Adriaensens, Guido Bastiaens, Philippe Van Assche and Jos Timmermans) and of (abbey beer)-brewers (Alexis Briol, Dominique Friart, Willem van Herreweghen, and Theo Vervloet), complemented by some "old" hands in this field (Gustaaf Hermans, Jean-Luc Suys and Jan Van Gijsegem). The panel was completed by Michael Jackson, Freddy Delvaux (Catholic university of Leuven) and the B.P.M.-team (Ben Vinken, Danny Verheyden and Jef van den Steen).

To get a judgement, as objective as possible, you need indeed a panel. That way personal preferences are reduced to the minimum. After all, not everybody is as sensitive to all the different aromas and tastes occurring in beer.

And let's be honest: tasting or drinking beer is even more pleasant in good company.

The beers were tasted blind, but most experienced tasters immediately recognised what beer they were tasting. The order of description is the same as the order of tasting.

CHIMAY ROUGE



Origin: Notre Dame de Scourmont

Alcohol content: 7% Vol. Alc.

Bottle volume: 33 cl with red crown cap. Also available as Chimay La Première in 75 cl-bottle. Colour: dark reddish brown crowned with a rather modest white head

Aroma: hints of fruit (figs), bitter (rather from burnt malt than from hop) and a touch of smoked meat, characteristic for the yeast that was used.

Taste: slightly sweet and malty with a slight bitterness. The aftertaste is long-lasting and dry-bitter.

WESTMALLE DUBBEL



Origin: Onze-Lieve-Vrouw of Westmalle

Alcohol content: 7% Vol. Alc.

Bottle volume: 33 cl with crown cap
Colour: reddish deep brown, the head rather yellowish and copious.

Aroma: marked by esters and fruitiness, especially hints of ripe banana.

Taste: surprisingly dry, which makes the beer easy to drink; the aftertaste is rather dry, fruity and slightly bitter.



Beertasting

WESTVLETEREN 8



Origin: Sint-Sixtus Westvleteren
 Alcohol content: 8% Vol.Alc.
 Bottle volume: 33 cl-bottle without label, but with blue crown cap.
 Colour: dark amber colour and copious head that sticks to the side.
 Aroma: sweetish and fruity with medicinal touch.

Taste: full-bodied and sweet; you taste the used malts, even the chaff of the (winter) barley.

WESTMALLE DUBBEL (on draught)



Origin: Onze-Lieve-Vrouw of Westmalle
 Alcohol content: 7% Vol.Alc.
 Bottle volume: the only trappist on draught.
 Colour: the same as the bottled Westmalle Dubbel.
 Aroma: less fruity than its bottled version, which causes the coffee-like aroma of the dark malt to be expressed more strongly. You can even notice a slight anise aroma.

Taste: rich taste of caramel and roasted malt. The aftertaste differs strongly from the bottled beer and is particularly shorter.

CHIMAY BLEU



Origin: Notre dame de Scourmont
 Alcohol content: 9% Vol.Alc.
 Bottle volume: 33 cl with blue crown cap. Also available as Chimay Grande Réserve in 75 cl-bottle.
 Colour: deep reddish brown with a fine, white head that comes down quickly and that doesn't stick to the side.

Aroma: bitter chocolate is dominant, but also spicy hints and a touch of smoked meat, typical for the used yeast (the same as for Chimay Rouge)

Taste: sweetish and warm from the alcohol; bitterness is hardly present. The aftertaste is therefore surprisingly bitter and warm. This beer obviously deviates from the others.

ROCHFORT 8



Origin: Notre Dame de Saint Rémy.
 Alcohol content: 9,6% Vol.Alc.
 Bottle volume: 33 cl-bottle with crown cap.
 Colour: reddish like autumn leaves, crowned with a white head that nicely sticks to the side.
 Aroma: fruity (banana/raisins), spicy and slightly bitter.

Taste: slightly sweet and yet not sticky; nice balance between the fruitiness and alcohol; slightly salty, slightly dry and bitter aftertaste. In short: complex and complete beer.





WESTVLETEREN 12



Origin: Sint-Sixtus Westvleteren

Alcohol content: 11% Vol. Alc.

Bottle volume: 33 cl-bottle without label and with yellow crown cap

Colour: dark amber with stabile, white head that strongly sticks to the side.

Aroma: raisin-sweet and nutty

Taste: bitter-sweet and warm of the alcohol. A

standard beer in its class, extremely suitable night-cap. The aftertaste is bitter and long-lasting. J

ROCHFERT 10



Origin: Notre Dame de Saint Rémy

Alcohol content: 11,3% Vol. Alc.

Bottle volume: 33 cl-bottle with crown cap.

Colour: deep reddish brown with yellowish head.

Aroma: very fruity (banana) with cheesy and woody hints.

Taste: full, fruity, sweetish, slightly bitter, alcoholic. Very well end-fermented, because of which it

stays very drinkable in spite of its high density. The aftertaste is long, dry and warm from the alcohol. "Nearly perfect", according to the panel, "to enjoy at home by the fireside".

To conclude

If there is one conclusion to be drawn from this tasting, it will be that no two trappist beers are alike. Or in other words, within the family of trappist beers there is a great diversity what "aroma, colour and taste" are concerned.

So, the trappist logo is not meant for aroma and taste characteristics, but it rather guarantees the origin of the beer, kind of like a beer variant on the 'Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée' of the world of French wines.

Within this great diversity, there is still a great unity in the society of trappist. They limit their production, which makes concessions typical for large volumes, redundant. Moreover, they brew in an ethical justified way: man is more important than profit.

Their "alternative" way of brewing is an important signal: you don't have to grow as a brewer to survive and that way you can invest more time in people and quality. These trappists don't know the stress of wanting more and more; many of us could be jealous of that.

And even Michael Jackson had nothing to add to all this.