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Monks who make world's best beer pray for quiet life

By Stephen Castle in Westvleteren, Flanders

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For more than 160 years the Trappist monks at Saint Sixtus monastery in Flanders have been producing a rich, dark-brown, beer renowned for its exceptional flavour and strength. But an unexpected misfortune has befallen this reclusive community of 26 Cistercians: their beer has been named the best in the world.

So great is demand that stocks are exhausted and sales have been stopped. As hits on the monastery website reach 2,000 a day, Saint Sixtus has been deluged with requests for media interviews from the US to Bulgaria.

At the gates of the monastery, near the French border and 50 miles from Calais, a notice directs visitors across the road to the claustrum, an exhibition on monastic life. Normally, the only outsiders allowed to visit the silent order are those who seek spiritual contemplation.

But Mark Bode, co-ordinator of the claustrum, has agreed to speak to The Independent and leads the way to a spartan office where he explains the principle behind the brewery. "It is to produce as much beer as we need to finance the community," Mr Bode says. "We make the beer to live but we do not live for beer." Hence their anxiety about the accolade by www.rateBeer.com, an independent US-based site for beer enthusiasts, which named Westvleteren Abt 12 the best. One of the two other monastery brews, Westvleteren Extra 8, is rated as the ninth best.

Most brewers would be delighted; the monks of Saint Sixtus are not. Mr Bode says: "They are worried about the publicity, about the hype around the beer. This is double-edged. It is a problem." He lives in the nearby town of Poperinge but knows how the monks think because he spent a year in their community. "Outsiders don't understand," he says. "They say, 'You are successful, make more beer; you will make more money'. But the monks believe the most important thing is monastic life, not the brewery."

So production will remain at 4,500 hectolitres a year, between 70 and 75 days of brewing. Belgium has more than 100 breweries and exports many "abbey" beers, only some of which have links to religious orders. But there are only six Trappist beers, Westmalle, Westvleteren, Achel, Chimay, Rochefort and Orval, all of which are brewed by monks.

Of these Westvleteren is the rarest because it has not been distributed commercially since 1941 and can be bought only at Saint Sixtus where, even in times of plenty, customers are rationed to five cases of 24 bottles. At the loading bay for car sales (closed), and the café at the claustrum, customers promise not to sell the beer. They do, at double the price. In the café, the one place Westvleteren is still available, visitors may buy only six 33cl bottles.

Inside the monastery's walled compound is a small, modern, bottling plant manned by three monks, producing 12,000 bottles an hour. Outside, three monks are loading crates on pallets. No one is speaking (permitted only in an absolute necessity) though a monk smiles as he hands us each a half-filled bottle of beer and another toots a horn as he sweeps by on a forklift truck

The monks sleep in dormitories and pray for up to six hours a day in seven sessions starting at 3.30am. They may consume a light beer, Westvleteren Blond, which, with an alcohol content of 5.8 per cent, is the weakest drink produced here.

The two others are brown ales: Westvleteren 8 (with 8 per cent alcohol), and the much-prized Abt 12 (Abt is Dutch for Abbot) with its rich bouquet, strong flavour, slightly bitter aftertaste and alcohol content of 10.2 per cent. The unlabelled bottles can be distinguished by metal tops.

Brewing began in 1838 because the workers who built the monastery were entitled to two glasses of beer a day. With an

alcohol content not much lower than that of some wines, the rarity of Abt 12 has won it a cult following. But the real secret may lie in the lack of commercialisation which makes Westvleteren almost impossible to buy.

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