

Traditional Boon Lambics getting higher profile in US

By Peter Reid—The late beer writer Michael Jackson made the defense of traditional brewing methods his life's work. He loved obscure beer brands, copper brewing kettles, wooden fermenters—and lambics.

For a traditionalist like Jackson, lambics were the real thing, the oldest beer in the world. As he wrote, "to sample lambic is not only to encounter one of the world's most complex drinks, it is to experience a taste of life 400 years ago...no other commercially brewed beer can trace its history back so far...nor, in the production process has any changed so little."

Jackson wrote about many lambic brewers ("many" being a relative term in a universe that comprises perhaps less than a dozen extant producers) but his favorite lambic brewery was arguably the Brouwerij Frank Boon.

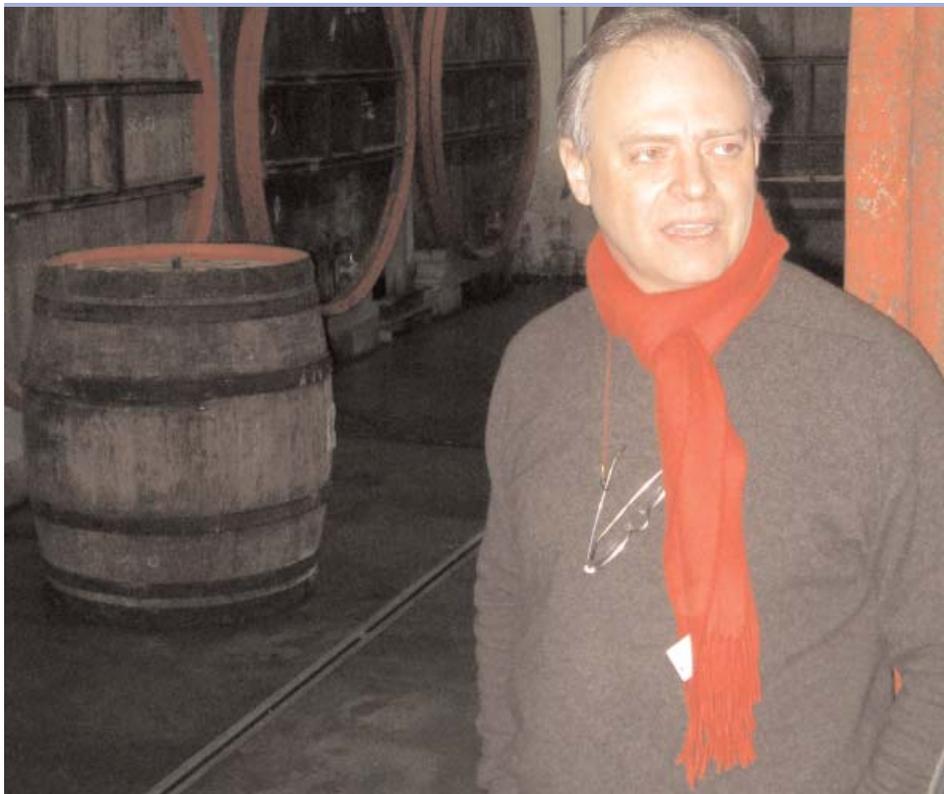
Mr. Jackson met Mr. Boon in the late 1970s, after Boon had taken over the traditional lambic brewery of Rene De Vits, and was immediately impressed by the young man stepping forward to carry on the declining lambic-brewing tradition.

Today, though Mr. Jackson has passed from the scene, Mr. Boon is still brewing lambic in the historic village of Lembeek. Through a partnership with the larger Palm Brewery, his brewery has been modernized and distribution expanded. In the U.S., his beers were previously imported by Vanberg & DeWulf, but are now available through Latis Imports of Ridgefield, CT.

Mr. Boon is one of the most eloquent spokesmen for his unique brewing style. "Our special style of beer is made with wild yeast," he says. "Some call it spontaneously fermented, but that is the wrong term. We use the wild yeast available in the air of the brewery."

Wheat makes up most of the grain bill for Mr. Boon's lambics, 30% malted and 40% unmalted. The grains are mashed using an unusual turbid mash system.

According to one story, this system may have arisen in the 19th century, when Belgian breweries were taxed based on the size of their mash tun. Brewers would draw off wort from the mash, boil it separately, and then put it back in the vessel, allowing use of a smaller tun. One effect of this procedure was the production of a dextrine-rich malt, ideal for lambic yeasts, which



Frank Boon started off working as a beer wholesaler in his native Belgium, and is now one of the most celebrated producers of traditional lambics.



The turbid mash system at Boon produces a heavy, highly dextrinous wort, very digestible for the wild yeasts that ferment it into lambic.

love to eat sugar. "A brewery is like a small sugar factory, converting starch into sugar," Mr. Boon notes. "Some use shortcuts, but for us, the turbid mash system is very important."

At 6 a.m. each day, the brewing starts at

Boon. The beer is boiled for 4-1/2 to 5 hours in two boilers. "While boiling we add hops," Mr. Boon says. "Not fresh hops, of course. We need 3-4 times more hops than a conventional beer. If we used fresh hops, these beers would taste like some kind of

strange medicine.”

The hops are aged for one year before use in the beer. “The hops are important for keeping the beer,” Mr. Boon says. “Lambic that is not well balanced becomes vinegar. But well-brewed with the right hops, lambic will last for years in wooden casks.”

Mr. Boon says that there is no excuse for vinegary lambics. “If a lambic becomes vinegar, there is something wrong in the brewery, or it was brewed in the wrong season,” he says. “We only brew from the first week of October until April.”

After the wort is boiled, it is transferred to the cooling vessel. “It stays there all night,” Mr. Boon says, “and the whole night the surrounding air brings in the wild yeast. Some German professors don’t believe that this system works, but it works. They seem to think the yeast comes from the wood, but most of it comes from the air.”

Mr. Boon also points to the brewery’s location in Lembeek, the traditional home of the style. “In the valley it makes a big difference in quality,” he says. “the closer you are to the river, the better it is. Down by the river, we get better fermentation than they do in the hills. We did tests in the next village, just four kilometers away, but it didn’t work as well.”

When it comes time to store and age the beer, most lambic brewers use stainless steel vessels, but Boon still uses wood. It is one of only two breweries in Belgium that still have a cooper’s workshop on site (the other is Rodenbach).

In the brewery’s cellar, there are 300 wooden casks. “Our oldest cask dates to 1883,” Boon says. “but every 10 or 15 years we take them out and do a complete refurbishment.”

The casks are made of Nordic or Belgian oak, with fine-grained winter oak the favorite. “If you use small casks with fine staves there is too much oxidation,” Boon says. “The finest lambic comes from casks with thicker staves.”

When it is time to bottle, the lambic blends are transferred to a 2000 hectoliter stainless steel tank. The brewery has a small but very modern Kronen Mecafill bottling line with a double vacuum filler. “I have seen some very nice beers get completely oxidized on an old filling line, and that is not what we want,” Boon says.

The brewery also boasts an Italian Bertolaso capper that can install champagne baskets. “This equipment can bottle two and a half brews in one day,” Boon



The open coolship at Boon, where the wild yeasts from the brewery find the wort, and begin the ferment.

reports. “People love the stories of the cobwebs in a lambic brewery, and stories of how we are brewing beer as it was brewed in the 1600s, but we, as brewers, must try to be technically perfect. That is the start of everything good.”

While Boon sells a small quantity of unblended lambic, 99% is blended into Geuze (a mix of old and new lambic). Geuze is the oldest Belgian specialty beer, and the name is an old Germanic word for “gas,” a reference to its sparkling, champagne-like quality.

“When you are blending Geuze you want the right mix,” Boon says. “We blend different years. With most other beers, within six months to a year, the quality declines. The secret of lambic is the contrary. Geuze is at its best after six months, and grows in quality for five years. There is no negative aspect to aging for Geuze. Even after 10-15 years, it keeps its quality, or even improves.”

Geuze is the foundation for all the Boon beers. It is blended with cherries to make Kriek, and raspberries to make Framboise.

“Most lambics are sold as fruit lambics, so many people seem to think that all lambics are fruit lambics, but of course this is not true,” Boon says.

“A key difference with our fruit beers is that we do not use concentrates or juices,” Boon says. “These are shortcuts. Each bottle of our cherry beer has 250 grams of cherries, and our raspberry beer has 300 grams of raspberries.”

Each year, the Boon brewery buys 300 tons of cherries and 20,000 kilograms of raspberries. “Raspberries are a small crop,” Boon notes. “They are expensive, so

this is not an everyday beer. We think of Framboise as a Christmas present from the brewery.”

Geuze is also the basis for Boon’s Marriage Parfait, a blend of 95% three year old geuze and 5% young beer.

While Boon takes great care with his fruit lambics, his personal focus is on the blended Geuze. “Gueze is a small market, we sell about 5000 hectoliters in Belgium every year,” Boon says, “but my number one customer is the Geuze lover. Satisfying that customer is my job. We want to make the best Geuze. We can’t sell Geuze locally based on the story, because they all know the story. We have to sell it based on the quality.”

Three or four years ago, a catastrophe nearly befell the Boon brewery. The Belgian state food agency made the brewery paint the walls and surfaces in the brewery with a special food-grade paint.

“It was just the law, the inspectors don’t understand the process,” Boon says. “We knew there would be problems. The brewers at Lindemanns told me that they hadn’t been able to get fermentation for two weeks after painting.”

After the paint dried, Boon and his workers spread beer all over the walls and surfaces, a process that may or may not have met with approval from the food inspectors. “But after three days we had yeast again,” he recalls, “living yeast in the brewery!”

Harnessing the magic of living yeast has been Frank Boon’s life’s work. But he says the proof of success comes only when a customer uncorks a bottle.

“As brewers,” he says, “all that we do is sell ten minutes of pleasure.”