

Flanders

Red and Brown

BY K. FLORIAN KLEMP

THE QUEST OF BEER-LOVERS leaves virtually no cellar undisturbed. That pursuit is often about the novel inspired by the venerable, with the current curiosity in sour, aged beers motivated in great part by Flanders red and brown beers. These brews are an alliance of ordinary top fermentation, supplemented by unconventional organisms, finely sculpted by aging and blending. They borrow much from neighboring brewing practices and ingredients, mingling those to create something quintessentially Belgian and uniquely Flemish. These complex specialties are some of the most refreshing and remarkable brews in the world. Belgium itself is a melting pot, something reflected in their brewing attitude. Its brewers are wryly mindful of the big picture, but coyly ambivalent to their opinion.

Founding Flanders

The northern half of Belgium, Flanders, has been a cultural potpourri for the past few centuries. Historically there is an intimate physical and philosophical connection with Germany, France, The Netherlands and Britain, all of which contribute to many great beers of Belgium. The sour red and brown ales of Flanders may be the finest manifestation of that adoptive and adaptive mentality. The modern brewers of these closely related, nearly identical styles, retain sufficient traditional design to ensure a bond with that most rustic of all beers, and neighbor, lambic. They employ many of the same bugs as lambic, but without true spontaneous fermentation. Lambic is a remnant of white (wheat) beers, and Flanders ales red (barley) beers of Middle Ages Europe.

Just a few scant centuries ago, all beers were either spontaneously fermented or spiked with slurry from a previous batch. That slurry could have contained any number of wild yeasts and assorted bacteria adapted to the region. The porosity of

wooden fermenters and storage vessels would also have harbored a population ready to invade the fermenting and aging beer.

Over time, brewers learned to control brewing, selecting purer strains, and learning about controlled fermentation schedules and seasonal cycles. In parts of Germany especially, bottom fermentation and cool storage was becoming the norm some 500 years ago. But British, Belgian, Bohemian and Northern German brewers were still making top-fermented beers, mostly at the mercy of the season, often sour or musty, or both. Patient aging became *de rigueur* in Belgium and Britain, where aged and young beer was blended. In Britain, "stale" was not only the name of the aged stock ale, but also described its desirable tart and horsey notes. Much of this came from lengthy aging in wooden casks, from several months to several years. Oak (particularly French) was and still is the preferred cask material, being abundant, easy to work with and sturdy, while bestowing its own personality to the aging

beer. Vanillin and tannin are the two most recognizable nuances imparted naturally by oak. It is also quite porous, providing microscopic grottos for persuasive organisms, and a permeable membrane, allowing oxygen, a nutrient for *Brettanomyces* and *Acetobacter*, to contact the beer. Only used wine casks are employed in the making of Flanders beers. New oak is overpowering, but aging brings almost magical distinction to the wood. Older oak loses some of its woody character, but becomes more hospitable to microorganisms. Coopers are as important for their barrel building and maintenance skill as are the brewers. The barrels are scraped regularly to remove pore-clogging material, and are periodically disassembled and reassembled. Rodenbach, the grandfather of the West Flanders red style, has many casks over 100 years old, and some that date to 1868. Wood aging makes for convenient sampling and hence, blending, during the process, an important aspect of brewing in the 18th and 19th centuries. The British were especially known for this then, and the Belgians still for some styles, Flanders ale and lambic among them. There was much brewing cross-pollination between the two countries during that era. The common *Brettanomyces* (British fungus) brewing strains were actually isolated from casks used to age British stock ales in the 19th century.

Flanders' Finest

Though the Flanders styles are considered anachronistic, its brewers have modernized over the past few decades while retaining respectful attachment to heritage. Spontaneous fermentation has been replaced by mixed culture inoculation. Coolships, the large, shallow open fermenters that offer the best surface area for spontaneous fermentation, have mostly been replaced. Rodenbach introduces *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, *Lactobacillus delbrueckii* and *Pediococcus parvulus* to their wort, allegedly culled from their old coolships. *S. cerevisiae* takes care of the initial ordinary fermentation of sugars during primary fermentation, with *L. delbrueckii* and *P. parvulus* taking their successive turns during secondary fermentation to produce souring, lactic products. Tertiary fermentation is done

one of my favorite cafes and bakeries in the country. They make a lemon and poppy seed waffle with lemon butter and cranberry-hazelnut French toast. The daily specials are always an easy choice as well and the house-baked muffins with seasonal Oregon berries never fail.

Back up in Medford, the last but not least brewery to check out is **Southern Oregon Brewing** (sobrewing.com; 1922 United Way). They brew the gamut of classic styles and Dennett's perennial favorite is the Na Zdraví, a clean Czech pilsner. Tours are available on Saturdays and the tap room is open for limited hours Wednesday through Friday. But their beers are easily found around town including at two beer bars Dennett champions. **Four Daughters** (4daughtersirishpub.com; 126 West Main St.) "always has amazing stuff," and he points no further than their weekly tapping, "Rare Kegs Thursdays," featuring special releases from breweries such as Oregon's Hair of the Dog.

The drive from Medford up to Crater Lake National Park is certainly doable—there and back—in a day, but if your getaway calls for sleeping in the fresh mountain air, **Union Creek Resort** (unioncreekoregon.com; 56484 Highway 62, Prospect) is located more than halfway toward the park and cabin rentals start at less than \$100 per night. Perhaps more importantly, their on-site restaurant, Beckie's Café, is your only bet for finding any craft beer on tap. Equal to that, a friend of mine who is a former ranger at Crater Lake almost tears up at the thought of their seasonal homemade huckleberry pies.

Brian Yaeger recently moved to Portland where he homebrews and is exploring the beers of the Pacific Northwest.

How To Cool Off

Crater Lake, at 1,943 feet, is the deepest lake in the U.S.—the caldera formed when the volcano collapsed almost 8,000 years ago. The beauty of the lake startles visitors once they reach the summit of the rim. "You'd almost think that Crater Lake invented the color blue," exclaims Dennett, who enjoys snowshoeing in the winter but prefers hiking in the summer. Daniel, a former ranger, suggests hiking the Watchman Peak Trail for spectacular overlooks and the Cleetwood Cover Trail down to the lake, where Wizard Island seemingly hovers in sapphire waters. He adds, "There are some nice rocks to jump off of, and I believe swimsuits are still optional."

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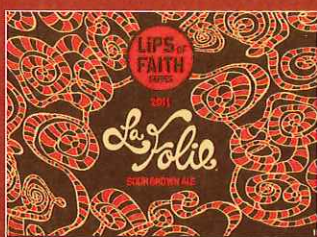
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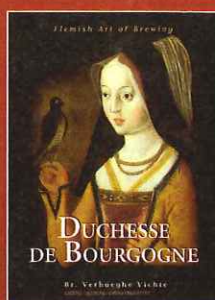
Rodenbach Grand Cru

The classic Flanders red, Rodenbach Gran Cru is brewed in Roeslare by methods carefully selected over 190 years. It pours garnet in color with a fleeting beige head. The ripe aroma is full of vinous notes, sour cherry, berry and hints of vinaigrette. The airy acetic acid slowly gives way to intense fruitiness. Thin and tart at first, Gran Cru segues to cherry, currant and plum, followed by oak, vanilla, faint must and more puckering sourness in the finish. The incredible sweet-sour mustiness is quite quenching on a muggy summers' eve. The "Burgundy of Belgium" never disappoints. **6.0% ABV**



New Belgium La Folie Sour Brown Ale

From the renowned New Belgium Brewery in Fort Collins, CO, La Folie (The Folly) is part of the Lips of Faith Series. This sour red-brown ale is aged between one and three years in French oak before bottling. Brewer Peter Bouckaert cut his teeth at Rodenbach. Crystal clear and tawny, it pours lively and is still after a few moments. The aroma offers cherry and hints of pineapple, with some vinegar and a full earthy dose of Brett. Medium-light in the mouth, the acidic edge is surprisingly mellow. The flavor is an appetizing balance of must, wood and sour fruit, the finish a firm shot of dark malt vinegar. As complex as any Flanders ale, La Folie hits the mark. **6.0% ABV**



Duchesse De Bourgogne

The Duchesse is brewed by the Brouwerij Verhaeghe in Vichte, East Flanders. This Red shows brilliant copper-red, the foam fairly tenacious and clingy. Horsey notes amid caramel toasted malt, vanilla, cherry and malt vinegar in the nose. Fluffy and sweetish on the palate, the flavor also has some residual sugary malt some spicy, nutty almond, vinous notes, reminiscent of port. The earthy and sour finish is rather subdued, and lingers very little. Duchesse is a blend of 8- and 18-month oak-aged brews, the bright, effervescent young and mature old bouncing off one another deftly. Well-rounded and smooth. **6.0% ABV**



Liefmans Goudenband

The Brouwerij Liefmans has been brewing in Oudenaarde in East Flanders since 1679, and Goudenband is its crowning grace. After two full years of aging, it is invigorated with fresh young beer, bottled and cellared to condition. It pours hazy ruddy brown, with a substantial head, lacy and sticky on the goblet. The aroma is soft and full of toffee malt, raisin, rum, apple and sourish lactic notes. The mouthfeel is medium, the sweet and sour flavor a combination of dark fruit, sherry and clean fruity tartness. Goudenband has a creamy finish and enough carbonation to keep the pour lively throughout. **8.0% ABV**

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in their famous oaken barrels (foeders), where several *Brettanomyces* species finish the job, a duration of 18 months to 3 years. The voracious *Brettanomyces* is capable of fermenting sugars, including dextrine, which *Saccharomyces* cannot, resulting in ultra-high attenuation. This lengthy maturation and multi-organism fermentation coupled with the oaky nuances is, in the end, sublime. When mature, Rodenbach blends its young and old beer in two main products for bottling. The regular Rodenbach is three-fourths young and one-fourth aged beer, while the more assertive Gran Cru is two-thirds aged and one-third young beer. The aging beer, known as "foederbier," can be sampled at selected times in its unblended, pristine condition.

The East Flanders brown, or oud bruin (old brown) style, is famously produced by Leifmans in Oudenaarde. The brand is known as Goudenband. The main difference between it and Flanders red resides mainly

in the method of fermentation. All necessary organisms—*Saccharomyces*, *Pediococcus* and *Lactobacillus* strains—are added to the wort prior to fermentation. The primary fermentation is done in open squares, where some airborne wild organisms may alight, and lasts about one week. When the wort reaches about 75 percent attenuation, it is transferred to stainless-steel tanks and the secondary organisms, *Lactobacillus* and *Pediococcus*, take over. *Brettanomyces* is absent from the mix, as is oak obviously, a condition reflected in the finished beer. The result is less attenuation and a bit less fermentative complexity, but this is more than made up for with more robust contribution from malt. Goudenband is hopped a bit higher, giving it a more classic ale profile.

The grist composition between the two sibling styles varies from brewery to brewery, but all use continental malts, at home in top- and bottom-fermented brews alike. Rodenbach has a base of Vienna malt, with crystal and deep brown Special B for dextrine, flavor and color. Liefmans prefers

pilsner malt and Caramelized Vienna and Munich malt for color and sweetness. Other brewers use variations on that template. A measure of 10 to 20 percent flaked maize is common to lighten body and aid lactic fermentation. Red emerges with a brisk fresh fruity character of cherry and plum, and brown with notes of dried dark fruit, toffee and caramel. The less famous versions of the two styles can come very close to one another in character, further proof that stylistic separation is sometimes futile.

The rather rare and highly unusual ales of Flanders are without a doubt an acquired taste, but in this era of experimentation and exploration, they are not without many devotees. Sour ales in general are becoming more and more popular, and even in America some adventurous brewers are toying with these wild and wooly organisms in a fashion that would flatter Flanders. 

K. Florian Klemp is an award-winning homebrewer and general hobbyist who thinks there is no more sublime marriage than that of art and science.