

Brewing *Then* and *Now*



The rich flatlands of Flanders were once an idyllic setting for the small, independent farms that dotted the landscape. Naturally, beer was brewed on these farms as it was an important part of Flemish culture and a necessary food product. The brewing season at farmhouse breweries was short due to the demands of sowing and harvesting crops. For farmhouse brewers, the cold winter months were spent building a stock of “provision beer” to drink during the rest of the year. Since the brewing season was shorter than usual these ales needed to remain relatively stable in flavor during long-term storage.

Observant brewers had learned that there were two primary ways to formulate a brew to help keep it stable over months of storage— increase the hopping rate or elevate the alcohol content. Increasing the hopping rate resulted in a more refreshing brew, while a beer with higher residual malt sugar provided greater sustenance. The two different methods resulted in distinct beer styles: one hoppy and refreshing, the other a full-bodied source of energy. In Flanders, these ales would be the forebears of French *bière de garde* and Belgian *saïson*. Each approach appears to have played a part in distinctly differentiating (at least in modern times) the brewing styles of northern France and southwestern Belgium.

Historic Farmhouse Brewing

Few documents exist that describe the types of ale made on the farm breweries of Flanders. Their rural origin and peasant nature apparently precluded them from serious scholarly interest. A few intrepid brewing scientists, notably Englishman George Maw Johnson, sought to define the methods of the farmhouse breweries of Belgium and France versus the British (and German) brewing methods of that time. In an 1895 article entitled “Brewing in Belgium and Belgian Beers,” Johnson reported on a number of ales of varying strength, most commonly in the range of 6 to 10 °Plato (1.024 to 1.040 SG). At that time, Belgian brewers favored ales of low attenuation, in the range of 60 to 70%, in order to enhance flavor and drinkability; a thin-tasting beer was undesirable. These low-alcohol brews sometimes exhibited local peculiarities such as the use of various cereal grains, including both malted and unmalted barley (varying amounts of raw wheat, oats, or corn were sometimes added); period of storage; and blending of old and new beers.

Johnson noted that Belgian brewers used a composite of yeasts that “act perfectly” together and in terms of fermenting lower-gravity worts, outperformed the pure cultures used by British brewers. It is curious to note that these higher fermentation temperatures, multi-strain yeast cultures, and occasional use of non-traditional cereal grains are attributes that distinguish modern Belgian farmhouse ales (*saïsons*) from more conventional Belgian ales.

Chapter 1 Farmhouse Ales



In 1905, English brewer R.E. Evans published “The Beers and Brewing Systems of Northern France,” reporting that of the 2,300 breweries in France, approximately 1,800 were located in the departments of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, formerly a large section of what was Flanders. The majority of these breweries were small, producing no more than 3,000 U.S. barrels per year.

Production in these small French breweries was centered on simple pale brews in the range of 9 to 13.5 °P (1.036 to 1.054 SG), known as *bière du pays* (country beers) or, in more urban areas, as public house or cabaret beers. These were ordinary ales brewed largely from local Champagne barley malts but often blended with barley grown in the African colonies. Small proportions of adjunct, generally less than 10 to 15% of the total extract, were often used, with cane sugar or glucose syrup most common. In some breweries, corn or rice flour was added to the mash tun. As noted by Johnson, Evans reported that extraordinarily long wort boils were commonplace—as long as nine to twelve hours. Evans remarked that the color of these brews was not nearly as dark as he would have expected and that the brewers sought “the maximum palate fullness and sweetness” to compensate for the low original gravities. Hops from the north of France and from Poperinge in Belgium were commonly used for bitterness while the finer varieties from Alsace, if used at all, were reserved for the last half-hour of the boil. Fermentation was carried out at a range of 64 to 72° F (18 to 22° C) using top fermenting yeasts. Typically, fermentation was completed forty-eight to seventy-two hours after pitching, then fined (generally with isinglass) and ready for serving five to six days after brewing. Some of the techniques mentioned define the modern French approach to specialty brewing, notably an emphasis on palate fullness and sweetness, use of a small portion of adjunct (often sugar), and a conventional ale fermentation (when ale yeast is used) in the range of 64 to 72° F (18 to 22° C).

Romantics may like to imagine the glory days of farmhouse brewing as a time when independent brewer-farmers produced wonderful, rustic ales for their own consumption. In reality, these homemade ales were extremely varied in taste and quality. As the name suggests, “farmhouse ales” were literally that, limited to the farms where they were brewed and not sold to a local market. Ironically, it was only when industrialization brought about larger breweries (with mechanized bottling lines) that transportation and distribution networks emerged and regional brands were established. As a result, some farmhouse styles eventually gained a larger audience, helping to insure their survival.

farmhouse ALES

*Culture and Craftsmanship
in the Belgian Tradition*



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Modern Farmhouse Brewing

Today a national border separates the region of Wallonia in Belgium and the French departments of Nord and Pas-de-Calais, the area once collectively known as Flanders. Flanders was an agricultural region with a strong beer culture and a rich tradition of brewing. Over the past centuries Flanders has been subjected to foreign invasion and domination, shifting linguistic borders, industrialization, and two World Wars. While some farming tradition lives on today, the region has been



improved, larger breweries made the small local brewery practically unnecessary. As consumer tastes changed and old-fashioned ale styles fell out of favor at the expense of high-tech lagers (known at the time as *bière de luxe* in France), many small breweries fell by the wayside, unable to compete in either price or quality with the larger operations. A few small breweries hung in there, producing low-alcohol “table beers” and lagers for local distribution. Others stubbornly continued to market the old-time specialty

It is reasonable to speculate that the glory days of farmhouse ales may be now or in the near future. Today there are more versions of both *bière de garde* and *saison* than ten or twenty years ago, not only in their native regions but also in the “new world” of the United States and beyond.

largely transformed into a modern industrial complex typical of western Europe. On a cultural level, generations of separation have created two distinct national identities with a common history of brewing beer. The modern regions of Wallonia, Nord, and Pas-de-Calais may share a love of beer and brewing, but their approaches to their craft have seen the effects of the border that has officially divided them since 1831.

The two most identifiable styles that emerged (and survived) from small independent farm breweries are *saison* and *bière de garde*. Both were formulated to be stored over a period of several months as provisions during the time of year when brewing was not possible due to warm weather and other demands. It is possible that at some point a uniform style of ale was brewed throughout the Flanders region; there is no evidence to support or dispute this claim. After the region became divided it is evident that the French side evolved to favor the malt-accented, higher alcohol *bière de garde* style and that the Belgian side tended toward the drier, hoppy, lower alcohol brews categorized as *saison*.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s the region became increasingly industrialized and emphasis shifted from agriculture to mining the vast coal, stone, and ore deposits in the

area. This development led to population growth and an increased demand for beer and breweries, particularly on the French side. Wallonia had a mining industry but remained primarily agricultural. There, the small farm brewery is a visible part of the landscape; today, only a handful remains in what was once Flanders. Fewer still have tried to adhere to the traditional methods and styles produced in a bygone era, providing a window into the past.

Ironically, the largest number of surviving farmhouse breweries are not located in France or Belgium but in Franconia, in northern Bavaria. Today, scores of small farm breweries are alive in Franconia as compared to a dozen or so between France and Belgium. The original ale styles produced by Franconian breweries have long been lost to more modern tastes. These German farmhouse breweries now produce the standard lager beers popular in Bavaria as a result of changing consumer preferences. While this same phenomenon applies to farmhouse breweries in Belgium and France, a few stuck to the traditional ales. Fortunately, they were preserved and would later enjoy a renaissance of sorts as a younger generation rediscovered these obscure, old-fashioned ales.

As the Flanders region became more industrialized and transportation

brews to a dwindling audience. Many of the farmhouse breweries that survived probably were able to do so as a result of low operating costs (their equipment was paid for long ago), farmhouse ingenuity, and resourcefulness that kept old equipment running. A small brewery with debt was unable to compete with large, efficient industrial brewers. Then, in the late 1970s, the unlikely occurred—old style specialty beers came back into fashion. More astute small brewers shifted gears and a market for esoteric specialty brews began to grow, not only in Europe but in North America as well.

While it is less romantic that some of these farmhouse ales actually come from large industrial breweries, it is this reality that has made the styles better known and popular. Acceptance and widespread distribution of farmhouse-style ales paved the way for smaller brewers to make their own interpretations. There are still a few who make beer in original farm breweries; fewer still actually brew beer on working farms. Brasserie Dupont and Brasserie La Choulette are examples of this dying breed. Modern farmhouse ales have a strong link to their past but have rolled with the changing times to stave off extinction.

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the near future. Today there are more versions of both *bière de garde* and *saison* than ten or twenty years ago, not only in their native regions but also in the “new world” of the United States and beyond. They will continue to evolve, expanding the style definitions to accommodate an increasing range of possibilities. As evidence of this, in 2003 the Great American Beer Festival added a separate category for *saison* due to increasing production of this style in the United States. The number of commercial brands of *bière de garde* produced in France has never been greater than it is today. The name recognition of *bière de garde* has prompted many brewers to throw their hat into the ring and market a version of the style, sometimes with little regard to stylistic accuracy (as Americans see it). With this growing popularity and number of interpretations, these two major styles are alive and well, and we should relish the variations as they make the ales all the more intriguing. As the French are fond of saying, “Vive la différence!”



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Belgian-Style Brews (continued from 31)

Techniques and Procedures

A single infusion mash is generally fine for Belgian styles. I normally keep the temperature around 150 to 152° F in order to produce a highly fermentable wort, but you can experiment with different batches to bring out different characteristics. With some beers that contain a high proportion of wheat, you can do a protein rest in order to lower turbidity, but a slight haze is OK in most Belgian styles.

Because most Belgian beers are dominated by fruity esters and phenolics, many brewers believe that you need to ferment at high temperatures. But that can produce an overly phenolic beer that’s prone to medicinal and solvent-like flavors. Most Belgian strains will give adequate phenols and higher alcohols without a high fermentation temperature.

Stick to standard ale temperatures of 65 to 68° F. If the yeast seems to be lagging, you can bump up the temperature a little, but avoid temperatures above the mid-70s unless the strain specifically says to ferment

it warm. The Wyeast Abbey II strain and, particularly, the *saison* yeasts (both from Wyeast or White Labs) seem to need temperatures in the low- to mid-70s in order to give the desired character to the beer.

As with any high gravity beer, oxygenate the wort thoroughly. To make a dry high gravity beer, you need healthy yeast. To get healthy yeast you need oxygen. Too much oxygen will kill yeast, but it’s virtually impossible for a homebrewer to saturate the wort with that much oxygen.

I generally keg lower gravity beers out of convenience, but bottle conditioning is the preferred method of packaging for high gravity Belgian-style ales. The flavors will marry and round out. Spices that are too pronounced will mellow with age as well. If you want to build up additional phenols and esters in the beer without getting the off-flavors associated with high fermentation temperatures, you can condition the beer at warm temperatures for several weeks after bottling. I’ve used temperatures as high as 80 degrees for two to three weeks with good results. I don’t do this all of the time, but certain yeasts seem

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to like the warm conditioning. You can always try it with a few bottles from a batch to see how they react. After the two- or three-week warm conditioning, store them as you would any other beer.

Recipe Formulation

There’s no shortage of recipes available in books or on the Internet for Belgian ales (particularly for popular styles like abbey and wit beers), but there seems to be very little information for developing your own recipes. I’ve provided three recipes to use as guidelines in developing your own. You can brew them as-is or use them as a jumping off point. You may need to alter quantities to fit your brewing setup. All of these recipes have produced award-winning beers in competitions.

Bill Schneller has been a homebrewer for five years and brews mostly Belgian-style ales. He’s also an accomplished sausage maker and cook, and is very interested in beer and food matching. He’s a proud member of the Oregon Brew Crew, Oregon’s oldest homebrewing club. E-mail him at Brauerei_Schneller@hotmail.com.

