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Belgian Beers.**

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**“EVERYBODY HAS
TO BELIEVE IN
SOMETHING....
I BELIEVE I’LL
HAVE ANOTHER
DRINK”**
W.C. FIELDS

June / July 2008
p.421

HOPS THROUGH THE AGES.

Hildegard Von Bingen, a 12th century Abbess (head of an Abbey of Nuns) living in the lower Rhine valley, was the first one who noted the interesting facts about hops. She was one of the smartest women that ever lived, discussing science, politics, literature, music and religion with the great minds of her time, including the Pope himself. One of her more famous works is a book about plants, spices and herbs.

She noted that using hops in the brewing process of beer gives the beer a clearer look, and let it last longer, and she added also a list of health benefits like the rinsing effect it has on the kidneys. But it took several centuries before the use of hops became more common.

Two reasons: vested interests and the bitter taste of hops. Indeed, most consumers were not that enchanted with a bitter taste for their beer. Beer had always tasted more sweet or sour. The vested interests were powerful Lords that had monopolized the trade of 'gruut', the mix of spices and herbs that was blended into the brew. These mixes gave the beers in a certain region its typical taste and flavor. Some of the mixes might have had some poisonous or mind-altering spices!

The Bavarian king, William IV issued in 1526 his "Reinheitsgebot" (purity law) as a reaction to that, stating that only grain, hops and water could be used to brew beer. From that day on

the Bavarian brewers were not allowed to add 'gruut'. This law

was later enforced on the whole of Germany, and it took the EU in the 1980's to break open the German market for foreign beers, not brewed along this purity law. The side effect of the law was of course that from the 16th century on most German beers tasted the same. Another important factor in that law is that it was in fact a power-grab by the king, since it was only HIS grain and HIS hops that could be used.

As an example of the power of the Gruut-merchants we just have to look to the beautiful city of Bruges in Belgium, where adjacent to the main cathedral we find the splendid castle of such merchants: the Gruuthuuse mansion, now a museum.

Two hundred years after Hildegard, the Bishop of Utrecht (The Netherlands), was granted a privilege by Emperor Charles IV in 1364 to brew beer along a 'new fermentation process', but in fact it defines as new the usage of hops. Also in other texts later we see the influence of the abbeys in promoting hops as an important ingredient for beer. In many cases these hops were used in combination with other spices, just as in plenty of today's Belgian ales.

Poperinge, the world famous city for hops, started growing hops around this time for 2 reasons. The abbey of St. Omaars (today just over the border in France in what is known as South Flanders) owned most of the land around Poperinge, and the Count Louis of Nevers ordered in 1322 the region of Poperinge could not weave any cloth any longer to protect the nearby city of Ieper (Ypres) from local competition. Ieper was the third largest city of Flanders just behind Brugge and Gent, and must have had great influence at the Count's court. Thus, growing hops became the ideal alternative for the people of Poperinge.



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Poperinge became so good at it, that their hops was sold and shipped to the rest of Europe. Poperinge was the first medieval city who founded a public certification system for hops. Growers brought their crop to the city hops hall, where the quality and the weight of the bag was defined. The bag was sealed with an official seal. Brewers in the rest of Europe could be confident buyers.

Two big historical facts have almost wiped out the hops cultivation in Poperinge. The first was the religious wars in the late 16th century when most of the hops growers fled to England, and introduced hops for the first time on the British Islands. But with the help of the Count and the know-how of the abbey, the growing survived and blossomed anew in the 17th century with a production peak in 1880 when over 10,000 acres of hops were grown around Poperinge.

The second disaster was WW I (1914-1918), when the front-line cut straight through the Poperinge region and stopped the production completely. Lucky, the farmers came back to their fields and started growing hops again after the war. WW I was the first mechanized major conflict and the fighting in the Poperinge area have left many remnants from the battles. Farmers today still find un-exploded shells from the war that work their way to the surface of their fields each spring over 90 years after the fighting ceased. They haul the shells to the side of the road and there is a service that picks them up and properly disposes the shells.



At the end of the 20th century, when the Iron Curtain came down, competition from Eastern Europe has made it more difficult to make money growing hops in Belgium, and the acreage has diminished tremendously. Although, you will still see plenty of hops fields around Poperinge today.



The beer that was created to celebrate the local hops is the POPERINGS HOMMEL ALE, brewed by Brewery Van Eecke in Watou, the village just outside Poperinge. It is brewed with only locally grown hops and is considered an icon in Belgium. The beer's 30 IBU (International Bittering Units) makes it hoppier than most Belgian beers. Three varieties of local grown hops are used: Challenger, Hallertau and Brewers Gold.



Brewery Van Eecke is one of the few breweries in the world that still uses copper brewing vessels. Many breweries in Europe were stripped of the copper during the world

wars. The vessels were all hand made and the brewer believes it is the reason for the unique taste of the POPERINGS HOMMEL ALE.

This year, 2008, the splendid Poperings Hommel Festival and pageant celebrates the hops, and is held on the third weekend of September. Hops growers from all over the world will be there. Our Belgian Fun & Beer Tour will be there as well. Hommel? Oh, we almost forgot, it is the local dialect for Hops.

Belgium 18th trading partner for the US.

Trade data published in the magazine World City illustrate the very substantial economic relationship between the US and Belgium. Trade between the 2 countries amounted to about \$36 billion in 2006. As a US trading partner, tiny Belgium is ahead of larger countries like India, Australia, Russia, Spain ... And it is not only beer. Diamonds and refined gasoline are the most important goods imported in the US from Belgium. The US has a trade surplus with Belgium, with exports (\$21.3 billion) about 50 % higher than imports (\$14.4 billion). Pharmaceuticals and chemicals are a major part of the exports to Belgium. We at the Global Beer Network are working hard to balance the trade between Belgium and the US: importing every year more and more great Belgian beer.

Claudine's Wittekerke Mussels

Makes 2 servings:

4 Pounds fresh mussels (+/- 35 per person)
1 Wittekerke beer (11.2 oz)
2 stalks chopped celery
1 chopped carrot
1 chopped leek (white)
1 medium chopped onion
1 twig thyme
Salt (a pinch)
1 chopped red Jalapeno pepper
Spices: 1 teaspoon mixed paprika powder (1/3), curry powder (1/3), cayenne powder (1/3)
Parsley (chopped)



How to prepare - 30 minutes:

Removing beards from fresh mussels: give a quick rinse sink by rubbing mussels together. This removes any soft exterior growth that may be on the mussels.

Hint: Pull the beard from the "little" end of the shell toward the big round end of the shell.



Place all ingredients except the mussels and the parsley in a large pot (to be able to shake and toss up later) and bring to boil.

Then add mussels all at once. Let boil again, cover mussels and broth, shake up occasionally, to bring the top mussels in the broth, and to mix the vegetables with the mussels. The mussels will open in about 5-6 minutes.

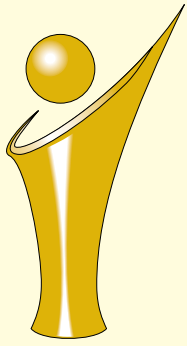
When the mussels have steamed open, place them (together with some broth and vegetables) in the Wittekerke Mussel pot. Garnish with Parsley.

Serve with French bread or French fries and mayonnaise. Enjoy this truly delicious meal with a nice cold Wittekerke beer.

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Brugse Zot wins again! Twice!



**WORLD
BEER CUP®
Gold Award
2008**

Belgian-and French-Style Ale.



For the second time in a row Brugse Zot, our Blond Belgian ale, won the Gold Medal in the category 'Belgian and French Style ales' at the World Beer Cup, held in San Diego in early April 2008. A month earlier in Australia, Brugse Zot won also Gold. Brugse Zot must be by now the most rewarded Belgian beer all around the world.

At the World Beer Cup, 2864 beers from all around the world were tasted by 129 beer judges coming from 29 different countries. Winning this prize two times in a row is a remarkable feat, and confirms the constant high quality of this ale, only brewed since 2005, and known for the use of aromatic hops and all natural ingredients.

We at the Global Beer Network are extremely proud to be able to import this outstanding beer in the USA. Brugse Zot is brewed in the last remaining brewery in the historic center of Bruges (Brugge), one of most beautiful cities in the world. De Halve Maan brewery is run by Xavier Vanneste, the seventh generation owner of this independent family brewery. Congratulations Xavier! The US Belgian beer lovers thank you.

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