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# Step Aside, Shower Beer: In Estonia, It's All About the Sauna Beer

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In Estonia, beer and sauna go hand-in-hand. From a very early age, Jaanis Tammela understood that one couldn't exist without the other. As the saying goes, a sauna without beer is just a shower.

"My first childhood memories are from our weekly community sauna where we youngsters were sweating on the lower bench with the grown-ups," he recalls. "We probably didn't understand those discussions carried over from the sauna to the relaxing room, but I remember beer bottles around the place all the time."

Decades later, Jaanis Tammela is the CEO and co-founder of Tanker, a craft brewery producing Sauna Session, one of Estonia's most well-known craft beers.

The Baltic country has a population of one million and is smaller in size than New Hampshire and Massachusetts combined, but it's home to more than 80 microbreweries, making it one of Europe's most exciting craft beer scenes.

Craft beer has been greatly influenced by age-old sauna tradition, including beers made especially for drinking in the sauna and inspired by its aromas, evoking fond memories in every sip.

Sauna stretches as far back as the 13th century in Estonia. Today, taking refuge into the wooden shack for a deep sweat is a typical way to relax and be social, but it used to be much more.

Estonians believed that spirits lived within the wood; as such, ceremonial washes for brides and preparing bodies for burial happened here. Saunas were hygienic spaces where people bathed, gave birth, and even smoked meat. In neighboring Finland, where sauna was invented, it was often referred to as the "poor man's pharmacy."

Beer was brewed in saunas, too—in ancient times, but also during the Soviet era when people brewed beer, grew vegetables, and foraged to enjoy a better assortment of foods than the limited rations they received from the state.

So when Estonia's craft beer scene began evolving a few years ago, it was because a lot of people picked up homebrewing again in their saunas, like the founders of Lehe, two corporate workers who brewed out of a sauna until opening a real brewery in 2013.

Falling For Beer

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By Barbara Woolsey



Põhjala built a public sauna inside its new brewery. Photo courtesy of Põhjala Brewery.

"There is nothing better than having an ice-cold beer after a hot sauna session," says Tanker's Tammela. "Our ancestors already figured out that beer quenches the thirst better than any other drink."

Eventually, Tammela and his colleagues had the idea to create a beer specifically for sauna-drinking. They were inspired by traditional brewing methods like using juniper branches as a filter bed for lautering wort. Instead of using commercial yeast, sometimes birch whisks were used to collect the yeast from the top of the fermentation and set to dry for the next batch of beer.

Juniper, birch, and oak whisks were often readily available, as they were an essential part of sauna. While soaking up the steam, it's traditional to take the young twigs and slap the skin or shake them in the air to release essential oils and vitamins, supposedly improving blood circulation, detoxifying, and softening skin.

Reflecting on the soothing smell of birch in the hot sauna, Tanker's brewers began experimenting and eventually created the Sauna Session. The beer is brewed with real birch leaves, sourced from southern Estonia. The birch is collected from the forest, dried, and then moved to Tanker's warehouse once a year.

"In the beginning, we developed this beer to supplement sauna, but we found out later that it works [for those] longing for sauna as well," says Tammela, adding that Tanker will need to expand Sauna Session production soon.

Õllenaut brewery, based in Harju County outside of Tallinn, also works with birch and juniper. Its saison Sauna Alus translates to mean "the foundation of the sauna."

Founder Urmas Roots describes the beer as a "liquid sauna" made for drinking to get in the mood while the sauna is heating up. It's also brewed with birch.







Öllenaut founder Urmas Roots (center). Photo courtesy of Öllenaut.

"My father died, so my uncle introduced me to sauna and beer traditions," he says. "Water is good for hydrating, but beer completes the sauna session ... in the sauna, there are no secrets as people are naked physically and mentally and beer acts as a social lubricant. One has to remember, though: that what was told in sauna, stays in the sauna!"

Honoring those traditions, Estonia's most successful craft brewery, Põhjala, decided to build a public sauna in the new brewery, which opened last year. The old shipyard location, which also includes a taproom restaurant, offers guided tours and the sauna as an extra perk for groups of up to eight persons. Most nights, it's booked out.

"Sauna is such a big part of the Estonian identity and life in general that we wanted to bring that to the brewery. I mean, everyone owns a sauna [or two] over here, but not a brewery with a sauna," says Enn Parel, Põhjala's CEO and co-founder.

Põhjala opened in 2011 and is now the Baltic region's largest craft brewery with an annual turnover of 2.3 million euros. Despite this, Põhjala continues to stay true to its Estonian roots, often working with birch and juniper. In the foraged Forest Series, Põhjala has produced an ale of the two ingredients, as well as a barrel-aged imperial gruit with juniper berries.

The light, woody Sauna Session accounts for one-third of Tanker's total production in Estonia and has also become popular in other countries where sauna culture exists, like Finland. Tanker also brews a stronger double session for the Russian market and a low-ABV version for Sweden.

As it turns out, these powerhouse countries are interested in a taste of Estonian heritage.

"We have exported a lot of Sauna Session to neighboring countries, but also bigger orders to the United Kingdom and France," says Tammela. "Sauna Session has even been around Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and many other places. The work is ongoing to find importing partners we can work with."

ZX Ventures, a division within AB InBev, is an investor in October

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