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Berlin Brewers Are Saving Berliner Weisse From Its Syrupy Past

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Brewer Michael Schwab grew up in Berlin, but he never cracked open a Berliner Weisse. He didn't even learn about it at his Berlin brewing school. But a few years ago, when a neighbor brought him a Weisse bottle from the 1950s, produced by a long-defunct local brewery, that all changed.

"I found (Berliner Weisse) awful until I had this awakening," he says, recalling the slightly sour yet prickly-fresh character chock-full in the first sip. "It was spectacular. I thought, 'This has to be experienced again.'"

For decades, Berliner Weisse has been dismissed and disparaged by the very city that made it famous. Banished to tacky beer gardens and Spree riverboat cruises, Weisse is best known as a tourist's beverage—these days, doused with brightly colored flavored syrup and served in a bowl-shaped glass with a candy-striped straw. For the echter Berliner (true Berliner), it's a faux pas of serious German beer-drinking culture.

But finally, the tart, cloudy wheat beer is enjoying a renaissance locally thanks to craft brewers ditching the syrups and straws to focus on the product's natural effervescence.

"Right now there's a huge demand for Berliner Weisse," says Cristal Peck, head brewer of Berliner Berg. "It became bastardized over the years as this overbearingly sweet nonsense that was green and pink. I love getting behind the movement coming back to its city."

So how did Weisse lose the love? Well, the short answer: industrialization.

During its 19th-century heyday, Berliner Weisse was the most popular alcoholic drink in Berlin, with hundreds of breweries producing it. Prussian king Frederick Wilhelm was also a fan, allegedly having his son Frederick the Great trained to brew it. During Napoleon's march into Germany, his troops indulged and dubbed it "The Champagne of the North."

Berliner Weisse bars existed on every street corner. The beer inspired an entire boozing culture: Served in a three-liter glass tub, it required drinking buddies to help each other lift and sip. Sometimes it was mixed with the German spirit korn and caraway brandy or schnapps. People even buried bottles in their gardens during winter, digging them up later for a matured taste.



By Barbara Woolsey

Weisse, like many artisanal regional German beers, was a victim of the rise of industrialization and its preferred brew, pale lager. By the late 20th century, there were only two large-scale breweries, Berliner Kindl and Schultheiss, producing the beer.



Inside the bar at Berliner Berg. All photos courtesy of Berliner Berg.

Both breweries were eventually purchased by the Oetker Group, a German multinational food conglomerate with a \$13 billion turnover, becoming part of a portfolio that includes frozen pizza and baking mixes.

Over the years, executives have tried several gimmicks to reclaim the Berliner Weisse fame: those stripy straws, the bowl-shaped glasses mimicking the three-liter tubs of yore, and most drastically, those syrups. Available in two flavors, raspberry (pink) and the garden plant woodruff (green), the sweetness was meant to offset the beer's sour notes and compete with mainstream tastes for a smooth lager.

It didn't help much. A 2004 article by German news agency DPA titled "Only tourists drink Berliner Weisse" declared that the beer was "frowned upon." In the first six months of that year, just 3,000 hectoliters of Berliner Weisse were sold nationwide in supermarkets—too little to even be included in German Brewers' Federation statistics.

Only in the last five years or so, craft Berliner Weisse—without syrup—has found its way back to Berlin, in the fridges at spätis (late-night convenience stores) and trendy brewpubs like the shipping-container haunt BRLO and Lemke Brauhaus tucked into a train station.

"[Berliner Weisse] is just a pleasurable style," says local craft beer sommelier Sylvia Kopp. "It's low ABV, with a velvety sourness, and a lot of sparkling moments. Just a really nice drink for the summer."

The dog days of Berliner Weisse didn't happen by coincidence. The funding and initiative can be directly traced back to a push from local beer geeks. In 2012, hobbyist hacker and member of Germany's Pirate Party, Andreas Bogk, started a crowdfunding campaign called "Save Berliner Weisse." He raised just over \$13,000 and started brewing small batches out of a secret lab.

Soon after, gypsy brewer Berliner Berg was also born out of crowdfunding. Making a proper Berliner Weisse was always part of the plan.

Head brewer Cristal Peck churns out a double-batch to fill 1,000-liter tanks every week from Berg's small brewhouse in the back of a residential building. There is a big focus on natural flavor and some experimentation via fresh seasonal ingredients—all in all, a far cry from the brewer's first Berliner Weisse on a Spree boat cruise when she had to convince the waitress to let her order it sans syrup.

"We do Weisse with fruits, currant—whatever is in season and I can find, I brew it," says the Australian-born Peck. "Elderflower with lemon, because I've been picking elderflower from around the area, I would like to do cherries coming up. We've done blood orange and ginger, Italo disco with basil lemon, sage, and thyme."



Craft beer sommelier Kopp, co-founder of the Berlin Beer Academy, also started a small roundtable a few years ago for brewers and beer geeks to incite a comeback. Since then, they've formed the Berliner Weisse Association and held their second annual Berliner Weisse summit. Over 25 breweries attended workshops, tastings, and talks to start up a conversation about sour beer.

Beyond the bar, Berliner Weiss is also being served at restaurants. Brew Baker's Berliner Weisse is offered as an aperitif at Michelin-starred desserts restaurant Coda, where it's often jokingly introduced to guests as "Berlin Champagne," and the new No Name Restaurant in Berlin's historic quarter Scheunenviertel serves a Berliner Weisse from local brewer Schneeeule.

"That kind of beer is pure gold from my point of view," says No Name's sommelier Steve Hartzsch. "You can use it for sweet and salty dishes. Last time, we had a pork [lardo] dish with caraway creme on the menu, which matched outstanding together."

For brewers, Weisse is a lot of fun to brew thanks to a nuanced fermentation achieved through wild yeast and lactic acid bacteria. American craft brewers have already been producing it with gusto for a few years—au naturel with no syrup, of course.

However, there is still a long way to go before Berliner Weisse reclaims its former glory with its hometown. While Berlin's large expat community has gotten excited about discovering a local

tradition, hard-nosed Berliners are still coming around.

"If I did a purely Berliner Weisse tasting, no one would come," says Brewbaker's Michael Schwab, the only certified organic craft brewery in Germany. "But if I put it into a normal tasting with others, then people are fixated."

The brewer plans to continue making his organic Berliner Weisse in a vintage series, letting a more intense character and complexity develop over time.

The beer style's renaissance is only at its beginning. Who's to say? Maybe one day, Berliner Weisse can become the Champagne of the North all over again.

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

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