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These Breweries Are Bottling a Taste of the Wilderness

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Rait Kulli spends his free time foraging in the woods near where he grew up. Just 40 kilometers outside of Tallinn, Estonia's capital, Kulli recalls being as young as three years old, plucking wild berries from bushes with his brother and parents.

Blueberries, cranberries, lingonberries and cloudberries, nibbled fresh and preserved in sticky-sweet jams and marmalades, were the tastes of his childhood. Growing up in the Soviet Union, Kulli didn't know about many other fruits like bananas until well after the Iron Curtain fell.

Kulli is now the brewery manager of Põhjala, the largest craft brewery in Europe's Baltic region. Since its founding in 2011, Põhjala has become known for producing beer showcasing the flavors of Estonian nature—some forest ingredients have even come from Kulli's cellar.

"I'm happy to forage on my weekends," he says. "Going to the forest, relaxing. It helps me calm down."

Backwoods ingredients have become a true hallmark of Estonian craft brews. You name it, Põhjala has tossed it into the vat over the years. The brewery's wide-ranging "Forest Series" includes a Black IPA with spruce tips and blueberries, an IPA with rye and lingonberries, and a juniper berry ale. A Baltic Porter with porcini mushrooms, and another with caramelized birch syrup, also stand out.

"Our goal is to put Estonian craft beer on the map," says Põhjala's co-founder Enn Parel. "We never forget that we are Estonian and want to bring a local feel to our beers with local ingredients."

Estonia is home to one of Europe's most exciting craft beer scenes, with more than 80 microbreweries in a country that's comprised of just 1 million people, and is smaller in geographical size than New Hampshire and Massachusetts combined.

For a new generation of Estonians eager to define culture and identity beyond the Soviet era, craft beer has given ancient traditions like foraging and brewing a modern lease on life.



By Barbara Woolsey

Falling For Beer

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Põhjala's Forest Series. Photo courtesy of Põhjala.

"Traditions are important for a small nation to survive. Of course, getting back to our roots is also important to stand out from all the other breweries," says Jaanis Tammela, co-founder of the Estonian craft brewery Tanker.

Homebrewing has been happening in Estonia for centuries. As early as 500 CE, records show farmers were making beer for celebrations like baptisms and weddings, while monks brewed their offerings in abbeys and castles.

"I remember my grandfather making beer from malt extract, which was all that was available at that time," says Tammela. "My father-in-law told me stories about [people] malting the barley themselves to brew some beer for his wedding – and that was 50 years ago. There were times when nothing was available, but people still managed to get everything done."

Estonians foraged for the same reason, says Põhjala's Parel. "This is a culture of people making things for themselves. During the Soviet Union, people had no access to ingredients. In the forest, you could grow your own little luxuries."

Once upon a time, forest produce was even an important part of the brewing process. Juniper branches were used for lautering wort, while birch was used to collect the yeast formed atop of the fermentation.

"I would never imagine not going into the forest anymore, even if I wasn't working in a brewery. I will still go and pick my stuff even when I'm an old man."



Of course, nowadays, all the berries, bark and herbs are used instead to play off of the distinct flavors within a full spectrum of beer styles.

Tanker has used plenty of wild berries in its brews, namely its sour beers like Red Rain, a red ale macerated over months with local black currants, a raspberry ale called Pretty Hard, and Tystnad made with sea buckthorn and cloudberries.

Like Põhjala, most craft breweries purchase their ingredients from Estonian farmers, but Rait Kulli still forages items like birch bark and spruce tips himself. Last year's pine needles were mixed with vanilla pods and a different species of pine needle growing on the Estonian island of Hiiumaa, producing a bright, refreshing brown ale.

Recently, Kulli picked linden blossoms, which may soon make their way into a sour brew.

"These are just the usual things on our table anyway and what we're doing is only brewing with them," says Põhjala's Kulli. "We always thought [brewing with foraged items] should not just be about marketing, but using the stuff we have everywhere around us. It is so deep in our culture, it comes very naturally."

And at the same time as carrying on those traditions, Estonia's craft breweries are also handing down an impressive entrepreneurial legacy for future generations. Põhjala's turnover has reached 2.3 million euros annually and exports its beers to China, Australia, the United States, and across Europe. Recently, the brewery opened up a successful pop-up bar in Beijing.

"Our history was quite tough so that's why we are proud of our heritage, but I never thought about doing these things to keep something alive, I'm just repeating what I know," says Kulli. "I would never imagine not going into the forest anymore, even if I wasn't working in a brewery. I will still go and pick my stuff even when I'm an old man."

Top photo by Marke Saaremets.

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

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