

CRITICS OF GERMANY'S BEER PURITY LAW HOPE TOMORROW'S 500TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION WILL BE ITS LAST

- Paulaner and Hacker-Pschorr are two of Germany's oldest existing breweries. Both adhere to the Germany Purity Law of 1516, called the Reinheitsgebot. Credit: Paulaner –

by Tara Nurin

April 22, 2016, 1:02 PM - "As far as I can tell, the Reinheitsgebot is totally irrelevant."

The Reinheitsgebot—what?

Chances are that even if you've heard of the Reinheitsgebot, the controversial German beer purity law that celebrates its 500th anniversary on April 23, you have no idea how to say it. So let's sound it out together. Rhine-HITES-kuh-boat. Got it? Great. Now let's talk about why so many beer folk, German and otherwise, wish they'd never have to hear the word again, and why it's likely we'll actually hear it more in coming years, rather than less.

"Unfortunately, many people seem to get confused about the reasons for the high quality of German beer," writes Ron Pattinson, along with the comment above, on his website, europeanbeerguide.net. "German beer is good because German brewers are highly skilled and make their beer with pride and care. ... A crap, money-grubbing commercial brewery will manage to brew bland rubbish either within or without the constraints of the Reinheitsgebot."

The 19th century brought the addition of yeast to the approved ingredient list. In the 20th century, government officials made more revisions, allowing for ingredients like wheat and salt and appeasing northern brewers by letting them add certain sugars to their lagers and ales.

But that's about where the agreement ends.

The aristocrats who issued the edict justified themselves by claiming they were making beer safer and boosting its pervasively poor quality by outlawing additives – think chalk, soot and even hard boiled eggs — that an unregulated industry used at whim at a time when respectable ingredients were scarce. Critics dispute the claim by arguing that nobles simply wanted to increase production so they could collect more fees from brewers while ensuring the upper class didn't run out of the wheat and rye their cooks needed to bake bread.

Whichever the case, blame the Reinheitsgebot for leading people to somewhat mistakenly consider German beers to be boringly similar. It gives critics reason to complain that the rule, still on the books though not necessarily enforced, stifles creativity and has no place in the modern world.

To spite the Reinheitsgebot just as it turns 500, Bavarian brewer Tilman Ludwig is brewing 300 cases of ale with ginger, lemon verbena, peppermint and basil. He tells Bloomberg.com, “The Reinheitsgebot is not my enemy; I’m just in favor of more diversity and openness. I want the consumer to decide if a beer is good or bad, and not some public authority.”

One can argue that despite Germans’ reputation for brewing exceptional beer, it’s the Belgians, with their spiced and fruity ales, whom American craft brewers more readily admire and copy. Belgian beer bars seem to outnumber German ones in the U.S., and only a very few breweries, like Gunpowder Falls near York, PA, adhere to the German tradition.

So purists are taking advantage of the anniversary to promote its benefits.

“These products were brewed to a classic standard,” says Steve Hauser, CEO of Paulaner USA, whose Munich-based beer has been brewed in accordance since 1634. “I’m not suggesting people shouldn’t try to push the envelope but we believe (Reinheitsgebot-adherent beers) yield the product as originally envisioned. That doesn’t mean that our product is inferior. We do feel the Reinheitsgebot delivers the cleanest experience in beer drinking.”

Sophisticated American beer drinkers *are* coming back around to lagers, though the reverse is happening in England. In 2015, small, independent breweries won two of three medals in the Great American Beer Festival’s “American-Style Lager or Light Lager” category for the first time, and it’s the only time in nearly 20 years that such a brewery has won any medal in the category. And despite craft drinkers’ traditional disregard for bottom fermentation, the Brewers Association reports that sales of craft pilsner (a type of lager) at chain markets and convenience stores jumped 123% between August 2014 and 2015.

Not only are craft lagers climbing, some imports, which have taken a hit from craft beer’s ascension, are rising in popularity, too. After suffering through flagging sales between 2012 and 2014, Paulaner USA depletion rates rose 4% overall from 2014 to 2015 in the U.S., thanks in part to a relatively dramatic 13% increase at grocery stores. Even the much-maligned Heineken lager, a Dutch brand that uses only the four Reinheitsgebot-approved ingredients, has rebounded after a seven-year, double-digit slump.

Hauser thanks craft beer drinkers for raising drinkers’ standards and compares the aforementioned reversal to a similar one taking place in the wine world. Thirty years ago, famed critic Robert Parker shifted America’s palate toward bold, high-proof reds – something wine drinkers are starting to eschew in favor of balance and lower alcohol. Likewise, craft beer drinkers spent several years competing with one another to drink and brew the hoppiest, most alcoholic IPAs yet are now settling into low-alcohol “session” beers with more subtle flavors. Such as lagers.

“Import specialty brands owe the American craft brewers a debt of gratitude,” Hauser says. “In a bit of irony they’ve been brewing these interpretations of classic styles and have brought tremendous numbers into the category. As those drinkers mature in the category they’ll realize

the best is the traditional. Craft brewing created a disruption in the market but the market tends to absorb these disruptions.”

But German officials haven't taken kindly to certain disruptions in their beer purity law. In 1987, the European Union had to force Germany to accept non-adhering imports, and non-compliant technological advances like forced carbonation, modern clarifying agents and stabilizers leave German brewers behind.

Evidently, that's how most Germans like it. Hauser says German polls show that 85% of the population considers the Reinheitsgebot to be an important part of the nation's heritage, and 89% of young people agree. Certainly, Germans understand the law better than Americans, who believe all kinds of misconceptions – most famously that yeast joined the list of accepted ingredients in 1906 only because brewers didn't know about it much before then.

But according to Jeff Alworth in [this demystifying All About Beer article](#), brewers understood the fermentation abilities of yeast many years earlier. Authors of the law initially left it out because brewers removed the visible yeast sediment from the beer after it fermented so they didn't consider it a lasting ingredient.

To clarify these misconceptions and to engender more love for the law, Paulaner (pronounced Paul-ANN-er) is hosting events on April 23 in New York, L.A., Chicago and Boulder, Colorado, with each party featuring one of the four ingredients allowed under the Reinheitsgebot. It's also sponsoring informational articles in beer magazines like this one to rail against the prevailing German-beer-is-boring sentiment by arguing that German scientists keep things fresh by developing flavorful hop strains and that techniques like barrel-aging and dry-hopping add flavor and aroma to beer without altering the ingredients. They also argue that as people seek out more natural foods, they'll want to follow up with cleaner styles of beer.

Though it's unlikely, with all of this pushback, that the Reinheitsgebot will survive another 500 years, especially considering that the E.U. denied Germany's application to designate it an intangible cultural heritage, it is true that adherence to the law demands that German brewers become more exacting and arguably more skilled. It's easy to cover up flaws with a massive infusion of espresso or cherimoya fruits, not so easy to do so when your beer is restrained and unadulterated. And when you can't rely on the shortcuts that advances in beermaking afford your foreign peers, you're forced to stick with more laborious ways of doing things. And for better or for worse, Hauser says the Reinheitsgebot has contributed to a very steady German brewing industry whose breweries have numbered between 1300 and 1400 for the past decade or two. If the Reinheitsgebot does last for the next half-eon, that quantity may remain consistent. But so too should the quality.

“It's tough to brew according to the Reinheitsgebot,” Hauser says. “You have to have a really talented brewer.”

And we can all agree that is something to be celebrated.

