

Opinion: Craft beer will never have a seat at Oktoberfest

Germany's 500-year-old beer purity laws keep the real Oktoberfest in Munich from being trendy

By: Jason Notte

Sept 16, 2016 12:00 AM - With modern U.S. craft beer dating back little more than 40 years, it's tough to grasp the importance of *centuries* of brewing tradition.

That is where Munich's Oktoberfest and Germany's Reinheitsgebot beer purity law serve as a reminder of not only the importance of those traditions, but also of aligning them with modern context.

The 16-day Oktoberfest celebration in Munich, which [kicks off Sept. 17](#) this year, dates to 1810 and the wedding of King Ludwig and Princess Therese of Saxe-Hildburghausen. On the same Theresienwiese fields that hosted those celebrations, Munich welcomes millions of visitors to both the giant gala that the event has become and to the museum-like festival that's been hosted on the southern end of the grounds in recent years to bring the event back to its roots.

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At the center of all of it, however, is a whole lot of beer produced by six Munich brewers: Spaten, Löwenbräu, Augustiner-Bräu, Hofbräu-München, Paulaner and Hacker-Pschorr. They produce the “Munich beer” that was once an amber-bodied, sweet Märzen — brewed in March and lagered until the festival's kickoff. That's the beer that U.S. craft brewers emulate with their “Oktoberfest” offerings, but it hasn't been the Oktoberfest's official beer in decades.

No, the more recent Märzen is far lighter in color and offset with hop bitterness. That balanced lager, also commonly referred to as Wiesn (the colloquial name for the Oktoberfest grounds), has been the face of the festival and it's still brewed according to the Reinheitsgebot beer purity law. Written 500 years ago primarily to regulate the use of barley and to free up wheat supplies, the Reinheitsgebot limits the ingredients a brewery can use in beer to hops, malted barley, water and yeast. Even then, yeast was a late addition, and both rye and wheat managed to sneak in as well.

Though it reined in German beer styles for generations, it also forced brewers to do more with less. If brewers want to imbue a beer with coffee or chocolate flavors, they had to roast malt to yield those flavors during the boil. If brewers want fruit flavors, they had to find the right hops to yield citrus or tropical fruit character. Though brewers have pushed back and forth on revisions to the purity law, both drinkers and brewers have voiced support for both the tradition it maintains and the perceived quality it provides.

However, though there are 46 million U.S. citizens of German descent who've kicked off Oktoberfest celebrations of their own in Cincinnati; Denver; New Ulm, Minn., LaCrosse, Wis.; and elsewhere, the Munich brewers wish they and their U.S.-brewer friends would come up with another name for them. The people at both [Spaten](#) and [Paulaner](#) point out

that “Oktoberfest Beer” and “Munich Beer” are registered trademarks of the Club of Munich Brewers and fall under the protection of the European Union.

Yet despite the fact that ethnic Germans Adolphus Busch, Joseph Schlitz, Frederick Pabst, Frederick Miller, August Schell, David Jüngling (switched to Yuengling) made U.S. beer what it is today, the animosity that faced German immigrants who entered the U.S. in the 19th century lingers among modern beer snobs. Beer geeks who’d gladly fire off dozens of hastily typed 140-character defenses of the regulatory protections for [Belgian Lambic beer styles](#) get awfully silent when you point out that Kölsch from Cologne or Dortmunder from Dortmund are entitled to [the exact same protections](#). Where Lambic’s importance is considered unimpeachable in geek circles, the soft prejudices that made Prohibition a de facto referendum on religion and immigration work against German beer styles in the U.S. today.

Martin Zuber has worked at Paulaner since 1987 and serves as the brewery’s managing director. He also oversees Brauerei im Eiswerk, Paulaner’s pilot brewery that explores craft styles like its Bourbon Bock and Comet Ale while staying within the bounds of the Reinheitsgebot. His experience as a beer sommelier has made him familiar with dozens of styles and their boundaries, but doesn’t seem to feel constricted by the purity law that his U.S. counterparts so quickly dismiss. While he realizes that the Reinheitsgebot hasn’t exactly been a boon for innovation — at least compared with the U.S. and European craft movements — he sees the law as an example of what brewers are capable of if they’re willing to explore the boundaries and approach obstacles for different angles.

Despite being steeped in tradition, Oktoberfest beer has gone through some changes over the years. How is the beer that’s served in the brewers’ tents today different than what was there even 50 years ago?

Zuber: In the beginning of Oktoberfest, all the breweries in Munich served the Märzen beer style. This was the so-called “summer beer” and this was the very common beer style of Munich.

In the middle 1900s, there was an alternative to this beer style: the golden Oktoberfest beer. It has the same alcohol, so it’s as strong as the Märzen beers. In the 1960s and ’70s, guests had the chance to order the choice of two beer styles at the Oktoberfest. At that time, in general, pale beer was more popular in Munich whereas, before, we had more of the dark lager beer.

People preferred the pale version, and one [reason] was the drinkability of the pale version is a little bit higher than the Märzen beer. There are some lovers of the Märzen beer, but there was also a logistical reason: It was easier to serve only one beer style in the tent. This change wasn’t made by just Paulaner, but all the breweries of Munich. It was in the 1980s when they all switched to golden Oktoberfest beer.

Because you see the pictures of the Oktoberfest and people drinking this beer in quite a big amount in the big mugs, the most important thing is to have a high drinkability for that beer. Even though the beer is stronger at about 6% ABV, the people will drink a lot of that beer, so it’s very important to have a very balanced beer, medium body and moderate bitterness.

The hoppy note is very important to have this kind of balance, otherwise if you drink the beer it will be too sweet. It's like eating 100 grams of chocolate: After you eat 100 grams of chocolate, you don't want to eat more. A beer with high sweetness is the same. You need the balance between the body of the beer, the malt character of the beer and the hoppy note.

For U.S. travelers visiting Oktoberfest for the first time, drinking a 6% ABV beer in half-liter or liter glasses can be a bit daunting. What should they know about that "drinkable" beer before they make themselves comfortable in the tents?

Zuber: To get a high drinkability of a stronger beer, you have to have a high fermentation rate.

If you have too much sugar and starch, the drinkability is not as good and you get a hangover very easily. You need a high fermentation and a good balance of the body of the beer and the hops. We have a very nice aroma hop — Hallertauer Tradition — for our Oktoberfest beer and a high drinkability that will let you drink two or more liters and have a good day the next day.

The U.S. brewers tend to use Märzen as their example of an Oktoberfest beer. In Paulaner's opinion, is that correct or should they be looking into lighter versions as well?

Zuber: I know in the U.S. there are a lot of lovers of the Märzen beer style. It's traditional: At Paulaner we export a lot of the Märzen beers to the U.S. because we know that the American brewers love this amber beer style. But I couldn't give any advice to breweries about making a fest beer, but only the six breweries of Munich are allowed to produce "Oktoberfest." This term "Oktoberfest" is a protected term, so only the Munich breweries are allowed to produce Oktoberfest beer.

How actively are the breweries protecting that term? We see [a lot of infringement](#) upon it here in the U.S.

Zuber: There is a lot, and I've seen it a lot in the U.S., too. Normally, it's not allowed. It's a trademark. Fest beer is a trademark and it's only allowed in the Munich breweries.

Has the changing tastes of beer drinkers affected both Oktoberfest as an event and its beer?

Zuber: In my experience since I've worked for Paulaner and worked on Oktoberfest, the people who've tried the Oktoberfest beer first are really surprised when they hear that the Oktoberfest beer contains 6% alcohol due to the high drinkability.

They ask me why we serve this strong beer, and the reason is because it's traditional and it's the history of that beer. Then, after they have that beer, they expect that when they come the next year that the beer will be of the same quality. The challenge of the brewmaster and the brewery is to produce, every year, an Oktoberfest beer with the same recipe. The high quality is very important, because you drink a lot and you shouldn't have to get headaches the next day or a hangover.

We use very low temperatures during the maltering of the beer and have a very long time for the maltering. To produce very fast beer is easy, but it's not very nice to drink, in our opinion.

The Oktoberfest beers are still brewed in accordance with the Reinheitsgebot purity law limiting the ingredients used in beer to water, hops, yeast and barley malt. While there has been some debate over its use, what is Paulaner's position on it and how do you think it sets German beer apart?

Zuber: As you know, this year was the 500th anniversary of the Reinheitsgebot purity law, and we celebrate the law.

That's very unique, I think, to celebrate a law. We are really proud of the purity law because no one knows what the quality of beer would be in general if Bavaria didn't announce the purity law in 1516. We only have four ingredients for our beer, so when we want to improve quality, we have to be better than others.

Some people and customers in Germany complain that the purity law limits innovation. That's a fact, but I always want to compare it to a winery. If you have unlimited money and want to create the best wine in the world, maybe you buy the best vineyard in France, get the best barrels and grow the best grapes. After five or 10 years, you say "Now I have the best wine," but you will never get the idea to add some ginger or some pineapple to make the wine a little bit better.

The art of brewing is to use only some ingredients and raw materials. For us, it's an extra challenge to create such a diversity of beer styles within the beer purity law. That is our philosophy and, of course, some people complain. However, there was a questionnaire in Germany, and 85% of the people said they wanted to keep the purity law. Some of them are not beer drinkers, but Germans trust quality because of the Reinheitsgebot, and we have a responsibility to that.

We have so many possibilities to create different beer styles: dark beer, very strong beer. We use different new hops, for example. We have enough to do with only four ingredients that we don't need any others.

It seems like a great way to produce not only better beer, but better brewers as well. If you can use a hop like a Hallertau Mandarinina to get citrus taste in your beer rather than just throwing oranges into the fermenter, it's the harder way to that result, but it's the more disciplined approach.

Zuber: Right, that's the hard way to do it. For example, we produce some beer with new hops and that's the art of brewing: Getting citrus flavor in your beer without using fruit and only using new hops.

If you take it further and you use different yeast, there are endless possibilities.

The argument is also that if you work outside the Reinheitsgebot, you're limited in some of the flavor-and-aroma-producing yeast esters that you can leave on your beer. However, great sour beers like Gose and Berliner Weisse have come out of Germany as well ...

Zuber: The Gose is not a common beer style and, if you ask in Bavaria, maybe one out of 1,000 knows about Gose beer, so it's not important for us.

However, I'm very open to different beer styles, and I try a lot of beer. I have no problem with drinking a sour beer from Belgium or something like that. I have no problem with that. I really like some of these beers, but we have the purity law, and the law is the law and we have to keep it, or otherwise when you weaken the purity law, you can forget it.

Here, we have to be strict. There are brewers who can produce great kinds of beer using other ingredients but, in Germany, you can't produce it and call it beer. It's a kind of specialty, but you're not allowed to call it beer.

With craft brewers from around the world bringing their products into Germany, it seems that the Reinheitsgebot and Oktoberfest have become even more important for reinforcing German brewing culture and traditions. Is that the case?

Zuber: No. There are some craft brewers in Germany and some from abroad — like the Stone brewery — that make good beer styles. I have no problem with that. In general, craft beer has been an enrichment for the beer market in Germany. You now see established breweries produce new beer styles ... but within the purity law. I think that's not a problem for us, for traditional beer. Many people want to have a traditional beer because they know what they want and they get what they want.

Some beer geeks have offered the possibility to try craft beer in Germany. It's general enrichment, but it's not like in the U.S. where established breweries like Anheuser-Busch **BUD, +0.42%** and Miller were laughing about the small breweries at the beginning of craft beer and now they're competitors. In Germany, it's a little bit different.