

BELGIAN TRAPPIST & ABBEY BEERS





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TRULY DIVINE

JEF VAN DEN STEEN



PHOTOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION TO TRAPPIST BEERS



'Every Trappist beer is an abbey beer, but not every abbey is a Trappist one', the saying goes. And it's absolutely true!

First of all there are the Trappists themselves, the monks who lend their name to these beers. They differ in several ways from the other orders, the names of whose monasteries are also attached to beer. The first difference is that these other monastic orders (Benedictines, Cistercians, Norbertines) have been present in our part of the world for centuries, while the Trappists (also Cistercians, but of the Strict Observance) arrived in our country only after the French Revolution of 1789. Their presence here is therefore much more recent.

In addition, the monasteries of these other orders had been brewing for centuries when they were

suppressed following the French invasion in 1794. Prior to their arrival in Belgium, the Trappists had never brewed beer before.

Finally, after 1830 – the year of Belgium's independence – a number of suppressed monasteries were brought to life again, but none of these started a brewery. It was only then that the Trappists began brewing: Westmalle in 1836, Westvleteren in 1838, Achel in 1850, Chimay in 1862, Rochefort in 1899 and Orval in 1931.

Trappist beers are brewed within the walls of their abbeys, by or under the management of the monks. The proceeds enable the particular abbey to meet its living costs, with the surpluses going to good causes. All this is guaranteed by the six-sided 'Authentic Trappist Product' (ATP) label, created by the Trappist International Association (TIA). This association groups twenty Trappist abbeys





from nine different countries and was established to protect the name 'Trappist' as a designation of origin, as already established by the Ghent Commercial Court in 1962.

The ATP label was intended to make clear the distinction between Trappist beers and abbey beers. So much advertising is done for the latter – the Trappists themselves are much more modest – that consumers have begun to believe that everything carrying the name of an abbey (including often cheeses) is made by monks.

The term 'Trappist' or 'Trappist beer' should therefore be regarded as a PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), referring each time to the abbey where the beer is brewed. Trappist beer is not a particular beer type; Trappist beers differ too widely in terms

of colour, flavour, taste and alcohol content. At the same time there are also a number of common features: they are all top-fermented beers that have undergone secondary fermentation in the bottle or in the tank.

Until a few years ago, Trappist beer-brewing monasteries were an almost exclusively Belgian affair, with the exception of Koningshoeven at Tilburg in the Netherlands. In recent years, this situation has evolved considerably, Engelszell (Austria, 2012) Zundert (Netherlands, 2013), Spencer (USA, 2013) and Tre Fontane (Italy 2015) having raised the preliminary number to eleven. For the time being, I would add, as I am convinced that there will be additional Trappist beers in the near future.

THE TRAPPISTS, A CLOSE COMMUNITY

FOREWORD BY BROTHER XAVIER, ABBEY OF ORVAL

The brewing tradition attached to monasteries includes the branch of Cîteaux (or Cistercians), founded in the 12th century. Today, this branch consists in Belgium of the communities of Chimay, Rochefort, Orval, Westmalle, Achel and Westvleteren. In the Cistercian tradition and the life of the monk, a local anchoring is an essential part of the secret of a life dedicated to God. It is here too that the economic life of every community originates.

The beers that our communities produce are all original and defy classification, whether by yeast strain (unique in each case), aroma or colour. This applies equally to the history of their creation. Jef Van den Steen has come visiting us to lift the veil on the diverse and fascinating histories. In this book you will discover the faces these products have developed, often hesitantly and with much searching, but always with enthusiasm and passion. Based on his detailed research, the author highlights the people – the monks of the Trappist communities and brewery employees – who have elaborated each recipe down to the smallest detail and who over time have adapted the means of production to the ever increasing demands of current working conditions, while respecting the monastic framework, a place of simplicity and nature, focused on prayer. But if it is pointless to go looking among Trappist beers for a common brewing method, where do they meet? What unites them is the living source of a shared spirit. Because only there do you find the true secret and unique dynamism of our Trappist

breweries, a spirit of mutual assistance to ensure that the consumer experiences the authenticity of each product in a privileged place, according to the social project of each Trappist community, with a concern for ethics and solidarity. These are the values that the label 'Authentic Trappist Product' proclaims, and which are guaranteed today world-wide by eleven Trappist breweries. No caricature or rotund silhouette in monk's cowl nor any obscure recipe from a dark medieval book, far from it, but a commitment that gives life to each community. A commitment that also gives direction within our society and points a way into the future.

Brother Xavier, Abbey of Orval
Chairman of the TIA



Orval © WBT David Samyn



1836

WESTMALLE

ABDIJ TRAPPISTEN

WESTMALLE

Following the French Revolution, the National Assembly then governing France decided to abolish the country's many reli-

gious institutions, nationalize the church's land and use it to bring order to the country's public finances. The Trappists too were forced to leave France. Thus, on 28 August 1793, a group of ten monks left Val Sainte in Switzerland, where they were living as refugees, to set up a monastery in Canada. But they never got that far.

Through the efforts of Mgr Nelis, bishop of Antwerp, this group settled on Friday 6 June 1794 on the Nooit Rust estate in Westmalle, on the old road connecting Antwerp with Turnhout. This estate had been purchased by a number of wealthy citizens whom Mgr Nelis had been able to muster.

But on 17 July, just six weeks after their arrival, the monks had to leave Westmalle. The French had invaded Belgium and, for French expatriates, a possible confrontation with the French army was far too dangerous.

When Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo in 1815, the Trappists returned to Westmalle. But with the arrival of the Dutch, not all problems were solved: King Willem I's anti-monastic policy continued to threaten the abbey's existence.

Antwerpsesteenweg 496, 2390 Malle
www.trappistwestmalle.be

It was only in 1822 that the young foundation obtained the necessary legal security, when Willem I signed a Royal Decree

recognizing the monastic community of Westmalle as a *personne civile*. Yielding to the Dutch king's demands, the monastery established a school with a boarding section, to 'make itself useful to society'. Only Belgian independence and a new constitution assured the future of the community, and on 22 April 1836, the priory of Westmalle was finally raised to abbey status.





A HEALTH DRINK

When the monks settled in Westmalle for good in 1814, Lady Poverty reigned in the Kempen. It was hard work cultivating the heathland and making agriculture profitable. The brothers had to work unrelentingly and the diet was meagre. In addition, water was the only drink then permitted for the monks. Healthy, perhaps, but not always tasty or enlivening.

In his concern to keep up their courage, prior Alexius allowed the brothers to drink two glasses of beer a day. It bears witness to his courage in reporting this to Abbot Augustin de Lestrangé in a letter, knowing that, in his extremely strict rule, the latter allowed only water. Fortunately, Alexius could also report in the same message that there were no sick monks. When in 1836 Abbot de Lestrangé's very strict rules were forbidden by the pope, the monks of Westmalle were obliged to follow the more moderate constitutions of Armand Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, who in 1664 had launched a reform of the Cistercian order from the monastery of La Grande Trappe in the Normandy village of Soligny. Besides water, these permitted also skimmed milk, buttermilk and the local native beverage.

So as not to have to buy beer from outside, it was decided to brew in-house, a decision that matches the recommendations of *the Rule of St. Benedict*. This states that a monastery should be organized in such a way that monks can 'live from the work of their hands' (RSB 48.8).

On 1 August 1836, the construction of the brewery began. This enterprise called for a knowledge of brewing. Fortunately, there were two paters, both Dutch, with the skills to start a brewery.







Pater Albericus Kemp from Sint-Oedenrode had been a brewer's mate and cooper in civilian life, and was therefore familiar with the material side of brewing. As brewer, the abbot appointed Pater Bonaventura Hermans from Cuijk, a competent pharmacist and herbal doctor. That a herbal doctor was chosen to start the brewery may seem surprising today, however, in those days, beer was considered a health drink.

On 10 December 1836, the monks were able to taste the locally brewed beer for the first time – Trappist beer was born! The dark sweet drink was produced exclusively for internal use and served as a table beer in the refectory. Despite this, excise duties had to be paid right from the start. The yeast was sold to bakers.

Originally, the beer from the brewery was not considered as a source of income. For this the monks counted primarily on agriculture, livestock farming, grape growing and viticulture, which is not surprising given that the founders came from France.

THE BREWERY GAINS IMPORTANCE

Father Benedict, the order's founder, allowed his sons to sell their products so that they could live from the work of their hands. The oldest known sale of beer in Westmalle occurred on 1 June 1861 'of brown beer ... 60 francs'. This sale was undoubtedly for a full barrel, because a little later in the same cashbook we read 'of yeast, beer and wine ... 4 francs.' A full barrel represented a single brew, about 300 litres, which gives an idea of the size of the first brewery.

The demand for beer quickly increased, shown by the fact that a new storage cellar, ready in 1859, was already expanded in 1865. From then on, the brewery started regular sales. In 1868, for example, the paters noted 393 francs from the sale of beer yeast, indicating that the brewery produced about 35 to 40 brews annually.

Beer was brewed and sold according to the financial needs of the abbey. Between 1885 and 1908, the abbey was thoroughly rebuilt, and a foundation planned in the Congo, which would cost a lot of money. The beer sales were therefore stimulated, necessitating a modernization and enlargement of the brewery.

The new brewing hall in stainless steel with the old brewing equipment in red copper in the back.



To bring in the materials for the new buildings, an annex over one kilometre long was built in 1895 linking the abbey to the Antwerp–Turnhout tramline. Once completed, the line was used to bring supplies of every kind for the farm and the brewery. The same tramline annex was also used for deliveries to customers – truck transportation still being in its infancy. Customers ‘of the city of Antwerp and surrounding areas’ received their orders by the abbey’s own delivery service, which made a round every week. Those who wanted to be served faster or lived elsewhere were delivered by ‘steam tram or national railway’.

In 1897, the new brewery was ready, with its new 40 hectolitre brewing kettle. Although beer was already filled into bottles, most sales were made in wooden barrels.

The First World War, however, put a halt to the expansion of the abbey brewery. The monks fled to the neutral Netherlands, with only a few remaining to keep watch over the abbey. These could not prevent the German occupier from requisitioning the copper, and so the brewery was dismantled and stripped of all its copper. Only in 1922 could it be re-opened.

A DOUBLE OR A TRIPLE?

In that year, ‘non-candied sugar’ was used for the first time. This was all about brewing a stronger beer, first referred to in the cashbook as ‘strong beer’, later as ‘double brown’. Two beers were offered with extra barley: a low alcohol blond beer (extra – 4.8 % alc. vol.) and the new double brown (double – 7 % alc. vol.). Both beers are still brewed today. The beer sales proved only a moderate success: the times were uncertain due to the imminent global economic crisis of the 1930s. And it was no good hoping for an increased yield from the farm, in sandy soil and calling for a paid workforce! The monks had to go looking for a broader economic basis. Abbott Tarcisius van der Kamp hoped to find this by increasing the production of the brewery.

The name ‘Trappist beer’ was registered in 1933 and in the same year the decision was taken to build a completely new brewery. Until its completion, the old brewery remained in use.

In the new brewery, a first attempt was made to brew a super-beer, which was given the name ‘Tripel’. This beer was derived from a blond beer that had been brewed sporadically since 1931.





The imposing,
fully automated
bottling line.





No monks work in the brewery any longer, though some still work on the farm and in the cheese factory.



This golden-yellow triple – 9.5 % alc. vol. – was launched in 1934, in the midst of the economic crisis. In order to push down the price, and given the very high alcohol content, this beer was filled into smaller 25 cl bottles. In 1935, when a modern bottling machine was brought into use, these bottles disappeared. Since then, the Westmalle beers have been filled into 33 cl bottles.

The Second World War halted the breakthrough of the Westmalle beer, but the abbey survived without significant problems. After the war, the abbey faced a dilemma: should it limit production to the amount necessary for running the monastery – the choice of, inter alia, Westvleteren – or should it increase production from a sense of social responsibility for the region? Westmalle chose the latter option and now brews around 130,000 hectolitres a year.

VISITING THE TRAPPISTS

Westmalle is located about 20 kilometres from Antwerp, a major distance in the nineteenth century. When, from 20 September 1885, a steam tram connected Antwerp to Hoogstraten via Oostmalle, that distance was suddenly no longer a problem for the Sinjoren. At the end of the drive connecting the abbey to the Antwerpsesteenweg was a tram stop officially named Statie Trappisten. For Antwerp inhabitants, 'going to the Trappists' was a popular Sunday trip ... as it remains today.

The tram has long since disappeared (replaced by a bus in 1960), but the stop has grown into Café Trappisten. The story is told of this café that the beer is pumped directly to the tap via an underground pipeline from the abbey brewery. A fable, of course!





The abbey's own dairy farm supplies the milk for the Westmalle cheese.



The curds are placed into the moulds.