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A Moveable Yeast

Tapping Into Paris's Overlooked Beer Bars

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The waiter squeezed between the tables and clapped the bottle down with a Cheshire grin, practically daring me to drink it. Then, before I could say a word, he vanished into the cigarette haze puffed out by a score of clamoring Parisian diners. The bottle was clad in blood-red foil and its label depicted a gruesome device familiar to any student of the French Revolution. Its identity was spelled out in crimson letters: La Guillotine.

The first sip was a surprise. Sweet, pungent and high in yeast, La Guillotine was less severe than its threatening name suggested. All the same, at 9 percent alcohol, the super-strong Belgian ale was no pussycat.

"*C'est bon?*" the waiter asked, rushing past. I nodded.

Here at the grandiosely named Academie de la Biere (Beer Academy) on Paris's Left Bank, my quest for decent brews in the City of Light was paying off. On a previous trip I'd done the wine thing -- visited Bordeaux, toured vineyards -- but this time I wanted something foamy, frothier, simpler.

I thought it would be a challenge. The French, after all, drink less beer per person than any other European nation except Italy, according to a British Embassy study released last year. And because France is so closely associated with the noble grape, chancing across something as unsophisticated as a beer bar in Paris seemed as unlikely as stumbling into a KFC in the Vatican.

What I didn't realize is that France has a well-established brewing tradition dating back to cerveso, the fermented grain beverage quaffed by the ancient Gauls. Charlemagne encouraged brewing during his ninth century reign, and the 13th-century rule of Louis IX saw the establishment of France's first brewers guilds.

Some of the most important research on preventing beer spoilage and contamination was done by none other than the 19th-century French scientist Louis Pasteur. And one of the most ubiquitous words in French dining, "brasserie," actually means brewery, even if the term has become bastardized.

These days in France, there are signs of a burgeoning interest in beer. Purchases of specialty brews are increasing at a double-digit clip, according to the British report. A slew of new, small breweries and microbreweries open every year, especially in the northeast regions.

The authors of a guide to Gallic suds called "The Beers of France," John Woods and Keith Rigley, observed in the late 1990s that "brewing and beer appreciation in France is now undergoing a huge surge of interest."

At the Beer Academy, the bulk of the bar's offerings were specialty suds churned out by France's tiny neighbor, Belgium. Among the choices were monk-brewed Trappist ales, lambic beers brewed with fruit, and dozens of regional varieties made by uncommercial outfits.

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The inspired monikers of the Belgian beers fell mostly into two categories: Those named for saints (e.g. Augustin, Bernardus, Sixtus) and those named after biblical miscreants (e.g. Lucifer, Satan, Judas). The menu was an epic of good and evil fought with hops, yeast, malt and water.

Having braved the dangerous side of the menu, I wanted something benevolent, reassuring, solid. I chose a beer called Hercules. The waiter returned with a fancy ceramic bottle containing a coal-black elixir that rose to a creamy-tan head.

"It's stronger than Guinness," he warned.

I wanted to make a snappy remark, but I found that La Guillotine had cut off my tongue. Then the waiter vanished again, disappearing into the smoke like a mischievous genie returning to his bottle.

Over the next few days, my malt-motivated meanderings turned up a respectable array of beer establishments, ranging from dank dives to elegant microbreweries.

Remember that France is on the metric system, so draft beers are poured in denominations of the liter. The most common serving sizes are 50cl (basically a pint, and sometimes listed as *une pinte*) and 25cl (typically called *un demi*). Pints average about \$7. For fancy Belgian and French bottled beer, expect to pay upward of \$7 each.

Here are a few favorites:

- **L'Academie de la Biere** (88 bis Blvd. de Port-Royal, 5th arrondissement). In addition to Belgian brands, the casual, decades-old restaurant serves beers from Germany, Denmark, England, Australia and, of course, France.

Nearest Metro: Vavin. Info: 011-33-1-43-54-66-65.

- **Horse's Tavern** (16 Carrefour de l'Odeon, 6th arrondissement). Located near the Luxembourg Gardens, this cafe boasts nearly 200 beers from 24 nations in its stable. Especially noteworthy is the selection of "biere de garde," a uniquely French variant characterized by its golden color, rich maltiness and delicate sweetness. Brands like Ch'ti, Trois Monts and Jenlain are excellent representatives of this style. The bar's locale also makes it a great spot for surveying Paris's street life.

Nearest Metro: Odeon. Info: 011-33-1-43-54-96-91.

- **Bar la Pinte** (13 Carrefour de l'Odeon, 6th arrondissement). Never had chocolate beer? Banana beer? A beer that arrives spouting flame? This small pub across the street from Horse's Tavern is the antithesis of its well-touristed neighbor. Dark and subdued, the bar is frequented by regulars and beer adventurers seeking exotic brews. Many of the 60-plus beers are specialty Belgian brands (the high-powered Delirium Tremens gets the Best Name award).

Nearest Metro: Odeon. Info: 011-33-1-43-26-26-15.

- **O'Neil** (20 Rue des Canettes, 6th arrondissement). Billing itself as France's first microbrewery, this two-level bar and restaurant hums with a mix of French professionals, students and foreign travelers sipping pints of the in-house blonde, white, amber and brown ales (four to six euros per pint, less before 8 p.m.). The large copper kettles and wood-and-brass interior give the bar a 19th-century feel.

Nearest Metro: Saint Sulpice. Info: 011-33-1-46-33-36-66.

- **Frog and Rosbif** (116 Rue St. Denis, 2nd arrondissement). Co-founded by a Brit and featuring an English-speaking staff, the bar is another pioneering Parisian microbrewery and part of a growing French chain. The beer selection typically includes Inseine, the British bitter, and Dark de Triomphe, a rich ale. British newspapers, televised soccer and

fish and chips ensure a true Anglophone experience.

Nearest Metro: Etienne-Marcel. Info: 011-33-1-42-36-34-73. Track down other Paris branches at www.frogpubs.com.

For general information on travel to Paris, contact the Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau, 011-33-1-40-68-22-22, www.paris-touristoffice.com.

Seth Sherwood last wrote for Travel on the Oz Museum in Wamego, Kan.

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