

A Bit of Weissbier History

Ever since those beginnings in the Bronze Age, Bavarian wheat-beer making has had its ups and downs. More often than not, Bavarians made their beers from barley, mostly because the wheat harvest tended to be less reliable. Indeed, through the ages, Bavaria suffered through many wheat crop failures. Authorities in Bavaria, therefore, were always anxious to restrict the use of wheat for bread-making only and to limit the brewing of beer to barley. They knew their subjects well and feared that, if given half a chance, the Bavarians would rather go without wheat bread than without wheat beer! In 1447, the Munich city council even felt it had to forbid wheat beer brewing altogether. The councilors decreed that, within their jurisdiction, brewers could henceforth use only barley—a rule that Duke Wilhelm IV extended to all of Bavaria 69 years later, in the now-famous Bavarian Beer Purity Law of 1516.

In theory, the barley-only provision of the Beer Purity Law should have been the death knell of Weissbier-making in Bavaria...but it wasn't! This is mostly because the medieval Dukes of Wittelsbach, the rulers of Bavaria, had more than just selfless concerns for their subjects' health to guide them in their beer-political decision-making. They were also guided by purely fiscal calculations. And these drove them in the opposite direction from the goals of the Purity Law, as is evidenced by their strange dealings with the Dukes of Degenberg, in the remote village of Schwarzach, deep in the Bavarian Forest, near the Czech border.

In 1520, a mere four years after the passage of the Beer Purity Law, the Dukes of Wittelsbach, nicely ensconced in their cosmopolitan capital of Munich, granted their vassal from the hinterland, Sigismund von Degenberg, the exclusive privilege to brew and sell Weissbier in his home region—for a hefty fee, of course, which the Degenbergs then remitted for decades. In 1567, the Dukes of Wittelsbach confirmed the Weissbier ban for everybody else but the Degenbergers—only their fee for the privilege went up. Then, in 1602, the Wittelsbachs got a lucky break: The last Duke of Degenberg died that year without leaving an heir. As a result, the then ruler of Bavaria, Duke Maximilian I, found himself the owner of all the Degenberg clan's assets—including their Weissbier privilege. Such were the rules of inheritance in feudal Bavaria.

Instead of letting Weissbier die, Maximilian quickly seized upon the privilege for himself and extended it to all the lands of his realm. Henceforth, only he would be allowed to brew and sell Weissbier, and he would reap handsome profits from his monopoly. To ensure the proper transfer of brewing knowledge, he ordered the Degenberger's former Weissbier-brewmaster, Siegmund Bettl, to come to Munich. There, Master Bettl built the Wittelsbachers's first "white" brewery. It stood smack downtown on the location of the current Hofbräuhaus pub. Innkeeper Maximilian opened shop in 1605 and never looked back. During the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1848), the insatiable Weissbier thirst of the Bavarian subjects provided the sole source of revenue for the Catholic House of Wittelsbach to raise the armies needed to fight off the invasion of the Protestant King Gustaf II Adolph of Sweden.

Soon every little town and village in Bavaria had its own Wittelsbach Weissbier brewery, and the profits from the monopoly rose to almost one-third of the entire state revenues. The fiscal bonanza lasted for almost a century and a half, when, by the end of the 18th century, "white beer" gradually fell out of favor and the traditional brown lager of Bavaria started to make a comeback. As Weissbier revenues declined, Weissbier breweries run by the state bureaucracy became largely unprofitable. Thus, with the monopoly losing its value, the crown began to lease its Weissbier brewhouses to burgher brewers. In 1798, therefore, the Wittelsbach decided to permit any nobleman or monastery to brew Weissbier. This measure, however, did not save the wheat brew and, by 1812, only two breweries were still making it. For all practical purpose, Weissbier had disappeared from the Bavarian beer menu.

This was the state of Weissbier when, in 1856, the crown sold the seemingly worthless brew right to a brewer named George Schneider I, who happily started what turned out to be a brand new Weissbier dynasty: The Schneider Family has been brewing Weissbier ever since. In 1872, Georg Schneider I and his son Georg II even bought one of the Wittelsbach breweries in downtown Munich, the Weisses Bräuhaus. Today, this "white brewery" is a pub and still under the management of a Schneider, the sixth-generation Georg VI. In 1927, the Schneider family moved its brewery from the old Wittelsbach premises in Munich to Kelheim, a few dozen miles to the east of Munich, where it still is today. Though Weissbier-making was sufficiently profitable for the Schneider family to do well for the first hundred years of owning the Weissbier brew right, the beer style itself seemed to be destined to remain just one of the many traditional German brews...until, miraculously, Weissbier experienced a sudden and dramatic revival in popularity in the 1960s, a comeback which continues to this day not just in Germany, but in the entire world.

aftertaste but should not be harsh. Medium-dry to dry finish. A clean, smooth alcohol flavor is usually present. Oak is inappropriate in this style. May be slightly sulfury, but most examples do not exhibit this character.

Mouthfeel: Smooth, medium-light to medium body. No harsh hop-derived astringency, although moderate to medium-high carbonation can combine to render an overall dry sensation in the presence of malt sweetness. Smooth alcohol warming.

Overall Impression: An intensely hoppy, very strong pale ale without the big maltiness and/or deeper malt flavors of an American barleywine. Strongly hopped, but clean, lacking harshness, and a tribute to historical IPAs. Drinkability is an important characteristic; this should not be a heavy, sipping beer. It should also not have much residual sweetness or a heavy character grain profile.

History: A recent American innovation reflecting the trend of American craft brewers "pushing the envelope" to satisfy the need of hop aficionados for increasingly intense products. The adjective "Imperial" is arbitrary and simply implies a stronger version of an IPA; "double," "extra," "extreme," or any other variety of adjectives would be equally valid.

Comments: Bigger than either an English or American IPA in both alcohol strength and overall hop level (bittering and finish). Less malty, lower body, less rich and a greater overall hop intensity than an American Barleywine. Typically not as high in gravity/alcohol as a barleywine, since high alcohol and malt tend to limit drinkability. A showcase for hops.

Ingredients: Pale ale malt (well-modified and suitable for single-temperature infusion mashing); can use a complex variety of hops (English, American, noble). American yeast that can give a clean or slightly fruity profile. Generally all-malt, but mashed at lower temperatures for high attenuation. Water character varies from soft to moderately sulfate.

Vital Statistics: OG: 1.070 – 1.090
IBUs: 60 – 120 FG: 1.010 – 1.020
SRM: 8 – 15 ABV: 7.5 – 10%

Commercial Examples: Russian River Pliny the Elder, Three Floyd's Dreadnaught, Avery Majoraja, Bell's Hop Slam, Stone Ruination IPA, Great Divide Hercules Double IPA, Surly Furious, Rogue IPA, Moylan's Hopsickle Imperial India Pale Ale, Stoudt's Double IPA, Dogfish Head 90-minute IPA, Victory Hop Wallop

15. GERMAN WHEAT AND RYE BEER

15A. Weizen/Weissbier

Aroma: Moderate to strong phenols (usually clove) and fruity esters (usually banana). The balance and intensity of the phenol and ester components can vary but the best examples are reasonably balanced and fairly prominent. Noble hop character ranges from low to none. A light to moderate wheat aroma (which might be perceived as bready or grainy) may be present but other malt characteristics should not. No diacetyl or DMS. Optional, but acceptable, aromatics can include a light, citrusy tartness, a light to moderate vanilla character, and/or a low bubblegum aroma. None of these optional characteristics should be high or dominant, but often can add to the complexity and balance.

Appearance: Pale straw to very dark gold in color. A very thick, moussy, long-lasting white head is characteristic. The high protein content of wheat impairs clarity in an unfiltered beer, although the level of haze is somewhat variable. A beer "mit hefe" is also cloudy from suspended yeast sediment (which should be roused before drinking). The filtered Krystal version has no yeast and is brilliantly clear.

Flavor: Low to moderately strong banana and clove flavor. The balance and intensity of the phenol and ester components can vary

but the best examples are reasonably balanced and fairly prominent. Optionally, a very light to moderate vanilla character and/or low bubblegum notes can accentuate the banana flavor, sweetness and roundness; neither should be dominant if present. The soft, somewhat bready or grainy flavor of wheat is complementary, as is a slightly sweet Pils malt character. Hop flavor is very low to none, and hop bitterness is very low to moderately low. A tart, citrusy character from yeast and high carbonation is often present. Well rounded, flavorful palate with a relatively dry finish. No diacetyl or DMS.

Mouthfeel: Medium-light to medium body; never heavy. Suspended yeast may increase the perception of body. The texture of wheat imparts the sensation of a fluffy, creamy fullness that may progress to a light, spritzy finish aided by high carbonation. Always effervescent.

Overall Impression: A pale, spicy, fruity, refreshing wheat-based ale.

History: A traditional wheat-based ale originating in Southern Germany that is a specialty for summer consumption, but generally produced year-round.

Comments: These are refreshing, fast-maturing beers that are lightly hopped and show a unique banana-and-clove yeast character. These beers often don't age well and are best enjoyed while young and fresh. The version "mit hefe" is served with yeast sediment stirred in; the krystal version is filtered for excellent clarity. Bottles with yeast are traditionally swirled or gently rolled prior to serving. The character of a krystal weizen is generally fruitier and less phenolic than that of the hefe-weizen.

Ingredients: By German law, at least 50% of the grist must be malted wheat, although some versions use up to 70%; the remainder is Pilsner malt. A traditional decoction mash gives the appropriate body without cloying sweetness. Weizen ale yeasts produce the typical spicy and fruity character, although extreme fermentation temperatures can affect the balance and produce off-flavors. A small amount of noble hops are used only for bitterness.

Vital Statistics: OG: 1.044 – 1.052
IBUs: 8 – 15 FG: 1.010 – 1.014
SRM: 2 – 8 ABV: 4.3 – 5.6%

Commercial Examples: Weihenstephaner Hefeweissbier, Schneider Weisse Weizenhell, Paulaner Hefe-Weizen, Hacker-Pschorr Weisse, Plank Bavarian Hefeweizen, Ayinger Bräu Weisse, Ettaler Weissbier Hell, Franziskaner Hefe-Weisse, Andechser Weissbier Hefetrüb, Kapuziner Weissbier, Erdinger Weissbier, Penn Weizen, Barrelhouse Hocking Hills HefeWeizen, Eisenbahn Weizenbier

15B. Dunkelweizen

Aroma: Moderate to strong phenols (usually clove) and fruity esters (usually banana). The balance and intensity of the phenol and ester components can vary but the best examples are reasonably balanced and fairly prominent. Optionally, a low to moderate vanilla character and/or low bubblegum notes may be present, but should not dominate. Noble hop character ranges from low to none. A light to moderate wheat aroma (which might be perceived as bready or grainy) may be present and is often accompanied by a caramel, bread crust, or richer malt aroma (e.g., from Vienna and/or Munich malt). Any malt character is supportive and does not overpower the yeast character. No diacetyl or DMS. A light tartness is optional but acceptable.

Appearance: Light copper to mahogany brown in color. A very thick, moussy, long-lasting off-white head is characteristic. The high protein content of wheat impairs clarity in this traditionally unfiltered style, although the level of haze is somewhat variable. The suspended yeast sediment (which should be roused before drinking) also contributes to the cloudiness.