

BELGIAN BEER TASTING AT LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE

(Author's note 2010: written when Belgium had not adopted the Euro. Prices obviously changed, but taste probably not)

In most peoples' minds, Belgium is a small, flat country in northern Europe with a short length of coast, a mixed language (Flemish and French) and a complex political and social history due to proximity to other European nations. The name "Brussels" conjures up legions of Euro-crats to most Britons, and most of the latter, to their shame, drive through and experience Belgium as an irritating stretch of land that separates them from lakes of cheap, French wine.

However, in the land of beer-making the Belgians are GIANTS among us. Their beers decimate the German pretenders to the throne, and even the great, traditional British brewers must nod quietly in recognition of their superb craft. We are talking, of course, about the strong 'Trappist' beers that originated in the monasteries, and whose preparation is now also reproduced in a number of non-ecclesiastical houses.

While on an extended visit to the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve during late January and early February 1998, I have had a rare opportunity to sample these beers. Personally, I have never developed a taste for the fruity (Lambic/Lambeek) beers that are also produced in Belgium, and, owing to the abundance of non-fruit beers, I now present my idiosyncratic findings on 'standard' Trappist-style beers. Occasionally (quite frequently in fact), I lapse into pretension it must be admitted, but there again, you'll forgive me as I search for adequate words to differentiate these complex (and extremely intoxicating) beverages.

Exchange Rate during visit ~37.5BEF = \$1; Most expensive beer purchased in the supermarket, "Quintine Ambrée", was 72BEF, i.e. < \$2. As the Americans say "go figure".

The following list is chronological, and is accompanied by a personal ratings system of 'stars' (*) as follows:

- **** Utterly Wonderful. Life is not complete without a sampling
- *** Splendid. A must for the discerning beer drinker
- ** Creditable Belgian beer
- * I never turn down a beer

(1) Grimbergen Triple ***

Purchased 15-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 47BEF + 3.5 dep = 50.5BEF

9%. Made the mistake of buying a pack of six in my enthusiasm to quaff a decent Belgian beer during the first night here. I forgot just how strong these beers are; the first two slid down so easily that numbers 3 and 4 were inevitable. Numbers 5 and 6: I have no idea what happened. I woke up at 6 a.m. with a headache; all the lights on and propped up against my pillows with a book on the blanket. I suppose they must have been very good, but that served as a warning for the subsequent rate of tasting.

Postscript: had another two at bar "Le Prof" 28-1-98. I made a note to say that they were straw-coloured with a nice 1cm head. The taste was very smooth with hints of honey, and very little bitter overtones.

(2) St. Bernardus Prior **

Purchased 19-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 46BEF + 3.5 dep = 49.5BEF

8%, Fruity, slightly acidic bite (not unpleasant though). Medium brown coloured; slightly cloudy; slightly sparkling on the tongue. Not an 'all-nighter' drink though. Great label on the bottle: archetypal 'Friar Tuck' character with obligatory red nose and skull cap holds up a foaming example of his work.

(3) Westmalle Dubbel ***

Purchased 19-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 30BEF +3 dep + 33BEF

7%, Nice brown colour. Very pleasant first impressions; hint of dark treacle or perhaps it could be molasses. Wisps of licorice also. Good head. Drinkable. Definitely worth a re-taste.

(4) Leffe Tripel 8 **

Purchased 20-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 45BEF+ dep 3.5 = 48.5BEF

8.4%, Rather similar in taste to a strong Carlsberg lager, such as 'Special' or 'Elephant'. Dark straw coloured; very slightly cloudy; very little head when poured slowly. Head appeared only when 'sloshed' into the glass. No other flavours suggested while drinking; Carlsberg reference too difficult to dispell!

(5) Duchesse de Bourgogne ***

Purchased 20-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 25cl 37BEF + dep 3.5 = 40.5BEF

6.2%, Pleasant raspberry nose; First taste: impression of apples...mixed with raspberry; slight acid edge: almost like a "Strongbow" cider taste, but not as sweet. Not too viscous. Not much of a head if poured carefully; but great 'Viennese lace' all the same. Very pleasing colour: medium reddish brown. I fell in love instantly with the beautiful, renaissance maiden depicted on the label. Extremely filling: 25cl is probably about the maximum for this one. Fantastic with blue cheese I suspect.

(6) Le Fruit Défendu (Forbidden Fruit) **

Purchased 20-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 36BEF + dep 3.5 = 39.5BEF

8.8%. With a name like this, one anticipates something extraordinary. In reality, the beer is disappointingly 'normal' for a Belgian beer (i.e. still wonderful). A pleasant fruity nose; a pleasing light brown colour. Slightly reminiscent of the Chimay beers I have tasted before. Slightly gassy I thought. Very little head; no 'Viennese lace' at all. Intriguing label however: it depicts Adam and Eve in the garden, with Adam tempting Eve with a frothing glass of "Fruit Défendu".

(7) La Divine ****

Purchased 20-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 46BEF + dep 3.5 = 49.5BEF

9.5% This time I struck gold. Even as you bring the glass to your nose you smell some enticing bitter aromas. The first impression is of a rich, creamy taste, which is followed by a smooth passage down the throat, and then there is a surprising and wonderful bitter finish, rather like a

good English bitter. Obviously very strong at 9.5%, and probably a great beer to drink with a good cheese, possibly a mature cheddar. It reminds me of a beer that I had probably 12 years ago named "Old Chester", which was also intended to be drunk with cheddar. Not much of a head on this beer, but who was looking anyway? The name sums it up.

(8) Monseigneur Grand Cru *

Purchased 22-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 42BEF + dep 3.5 = 45.5BEF

8% Surprisingly pale (coloured) beer with a good foaming head concealed inside this squat, dark brown bottle. Not much of a nose, but an immediate sparkling sensation when it first greets the tongue. The aftertaste was a little bit nondescript, and tasted like...well, beer, I suppose. It has a very hoppy taste, and would be perfect served in a large tankard, foaming over, at a medieval banquet.

(9) Maredsous ***

Purchased 22-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 49BEF + dep 3.5 = 52.5BEF

10% The most expensive and alcoholic of the list so far, it poured with a beautiful sound (I kid you not) and required the aid of gravity from the raised bottle to build a decent head. A golden straw colour. Almost no nose. Quite a fizz on the tongue that was rather unusual. I can't tell if it went straight to my head and confused the brain, or whether the taste was rather subtle (i.e. difficult to pinpoint). Other sensations definitely overcame the sense of taste for this one. The effect on the perceptive faculties should entitle this beer to be called "Warpeur de Réalité".

(10) Quintine Ambrée ****

Purchased 22-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl 58BEF + dep 14 = 72BEF

8.5%. Comes in one of those nice, old style bottles with a wire-retained ceramic top and rubber seal (hence the deposit price). Reddish brown colour with a decent head. Wonderfully complex, fruity nose. First taste...complex bitters with a hint of honey. Very nice. Reminded me of a mead, but not at all sickly sweet. This beer was sipped and sipped, and each sip revealed more of the rich maze of delights within. Lots more to explore. Excellent all around, scores top with me

(11) Mechelschen Bruyen *

Purchased 22-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl = 33BEF + dep 3.5 = 36.5BEF

6% Light brown colour, no noticeable nose. First taste: not an impression of a strong beer at all, rather thin in fact. Another beer with a slight hint of treacle or molasses. Not a great beer, but drinkable all the same.

(12) Leffe Bruin (Draught) *

Purchased 23-1-98, Bar 'Pilote' at Brussels airport, price 115BEF

Dark brown beer, arrived with good head in appropriate glass. The head decayed within 5-10 minutes to leave a delicate lace on the side of the glass. Alcohol level, probably 6%, certainly didn't taste like a very strong beer, and also it was on tap. Slight taste of cane sugar. Definitely not in the same class of the previous beers, but probably possible to drink two or three without feeling the effects.

(13) Orval **

Purchased 26-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl = 36BEF + dep 3.5 = 39.5BEF

6.2% Nice head on a highly cloudy, light brown beer. The cloudiness may be because I disturbed the bottle as I brought it home, but I suspect it may be its natural disposition. A good, strong fruity nose too. I remember Orval as a very different beer to the other Belgian beers that I had sampled previously. Indeed, it has a pleasant, slightly sour after taste, as well as a bitter taste, rather like a Boddington's bitter. It worked for me.

Postscript 23-12-99

Had the sense that after two or three swallows from a mouthful, when pressing the tongue to the palate, that there is an almost soapy texture. As we decided; not a beer that makes you greedy for more, more of a "that was interesting, do you have any others" beer

(14) Het Kapittel Watou ***

Purchased 26-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl = 35BEF + dep 3.5 = 38.5BEF

10% A strong beer to be sure. Pours with a lovely bright 'fizz' and a nice big head that quickly settles down and leaves a good lace behind. Straw coloured, with very little nose, but the slightest sip even of the froth takes you straight to the heart of this beer: lovely strong hints of honey and an immediate sense of the 'thickness' of this beer. Make mine and pint and call a taxi.

(15) Trappistes Rochefort '8' ***

Purchased 26-1-98, "Le Cidec", price 33cl = 39BEF + dep 3.5 = 42.5BEF

9.2% A dark brown coloured beer with a good head. A pleasant fruity nose. First impressions on the palette: touches of honey and finishes of blackberry. Strong, thick taste. Smooth and drinkable. More please!

The name "Rochefort" had brought to mind the strong (and I mean very strong) green/blue French cheese with a similar name (Roquefort). In readiness, I deliberately bought some Rochefort cheese in case there was the slightest possibility that this beer should be tasted with a cheese. A romantic notion, but an enticing one nevertheless. After some tasting, I ate a cracker smeared with strong Roquefort cheese...then drank some more of the beer...ah, decadence!

(16) Abbaye de Bonne Esperance *

Purchased 27-1-98, "Le Cidec". Price 25cl =

8% Clear straw-coloured beer with medium head. Slight honey nose. First taste confirms hints of honey, but the finish is rather too bitter. After a while I found myself licking my teeth to remove that bitter taste. Otherwise, no other subtle tastes noticeable. A moderate beer only I thought.

(17) Bruggse Tripel **

Purchased 27-1-98, "Le Cidec". Price

9% Relatively clear, golden beer with moderate head. Pleasant nose. Very smooth texture. I can't quite place the tastes...definitely a sweet impression; it could be honey, but I don't think so. Bitter finish takes a few minutes to develop...quite an unusual effect. As you can tell, I'm having a hard time describing this one. Not that memorable when all is said and done, but I wouldn't turn it down at the end of a long day.

(18) Bush de Noël **1/2

Tasted at Claude Poleunis' house in Brussels 28-1-98, and the second bottle drunk 2-2-98. Price per 25cl unknown.

12% We all know that a winter beer is supposed to be stronger and richer than the 'normal' beers drunk at other times of the year. So, what do the Belgians do when they make a winter beer? Why, they make it stronger than normal, silly, which is why this one clocks in at 12%. It poured like Duckham's 20/50 with a ruddy colour and a sparkling, light head. The first taste: rich, malty, creamy; a gentle hint of a fruit...raspberries perhaps, and...strong. You can't really get away from the strength at this level. It pervades the beer and also the brain, rather rapidly at that, too. I think my only complaint is that it's so 'thick' that I can't imagine drinking more than 25cl. That's why it scores a **1/2, not ***. Also, why is it that 12% in a beer has such a strong effect compared to a wine of similar strength and volume?

(19) Trappistes Rochefort 10 ***

Given to me by Claude Poleunis 28-1-98, normal price 33cl =

11.3% Marvellously thick, dark brown beer with a rich persistent head. Smells like a stout with licorice overtones as you bring it to your nose. First impression: highly viscous, rich liquid. Hint of licorice confirmed, slight touch of caramel. Not sweet, but would benefit from being drunk with something sharp (I can't get the association with blue cheese out of my mind). The complexity of the beer offsets its 'thickness', and that is why I give it ***. I bet it would be fantastic to cook with this beer also (forgive me). This is the sort of beer that ought to be drunk at the end of a meal, rather like a port (too 'thick' for quaffing). It would be wonderful if the room were oak-panelled also, with wild, wanton wenches (poor excuse for alliteration) sweeping by with bulging platters of steaming, stuffed swan, as well as ludicrous amounts of this beer. Drinkers of this beer are said to be prone to utter torrents of utter drivel after just one beer, such is its power.

(20) Bush **1/2

Given to me by Claude Poleunis 28-1-98, normal price 25cl = ?

12% All of a sudden these strong beers have arrived thick and fast at "Chez Fraser". This one is a very clear 'blond beer', with a sparkling, but thin, head. Wheaty nose. First taste: pleasant bitter blackberry edge to a very smooth, malty drink. Is there a hint of nuts in there also? Reminiscent again of Carlsberg beers, but this one adds complex flavours and a nice bitter touch. Definitely one to impress the neighbours (i.e. fall over together), but the inability to actually plunge in and drink this with gusto owing to its richness and viscosity means that it scores **1/2 not a ***.

(21) Ramée Ambrée ***

2 bottles given to me by Luc at the lab. 2-2-98, price 33cl. Unknown

6.5 %. Nice brown colour with resilient, dense head. A light and refreshing nose. First impressions: not at all syrupy (viscous) compared to recent other tastings, certainly doesn't feel like a 6.5%

beer. All degustatory senses welcomed it with no regrets. Wonderful light caramel and toffee hints...pleasant bitter finish with a hint of pepper. I liked it, and I could imagine having one to quench my thirst, and then a few after that, too. After all, beer is for drinking, in case you've forgotten.

(22) Duvel **

Purchased in a bar in L-L-N, 3-2-98, price 33cl = 120 BEF

8.5%. Light yellow colour with thin sparkling head. Very hoppy nose. Light and refreshing to the palette, but extremely gassy beer I thought. This beer has a pleasant bitter finish. It does not taste at all like a strong beer, and I imagine that it is very easy to drink a few of these thinking that they are not very alcoholic. Wrong. The only protection against this state of affairs is that you would have ballooned out before then with all the gas, preventing an overdose of alcohol.

Postscript: Unbelievable wind all-round!

(23) Gueuze Mort Subite *

Purchased in the "Snooker Academy" 3-2-98, price 65 BEF

I didn't realise that this was a Lambic beer when I said "I'll have one too!" after Xavier ordered his. This beer is like a bitter, alcoholic, apple cider with enough citric acid sensed at the sides of the tongue to precipitate a large grimace (at least it did on my face). Not for me, but Xavier seemed to enjoy it.

(24) Rodenbach Grand Cru *

Purchased "Le Cidec", 4-2-98, price 33cl = 56 BEF + 3.5 dep = 59.5 BEF

6% Two in a row! I was taken in by the label which declared that it was a gold medal winner in some American beer tasting competition in 1996. It turned out to be another Lambic-style beer disguised as an ordinary beer by keeping company with other 'normal' beers on a particular shelf. The beer was a pleasant red yellow colour and sported a thin head. However, after that, things went downhill for me. The taste made me wince as if I had tasted lemon juice. Just too much citric acid for me. I presume one develops a taste for this after a while, it's just that I cannot imagine all the effort that would have to be invested before one came to enjoy this beer. Gold Medal? Which planet?

(25) Affligem Dubbel Brune **

Purchased "Le Cidec", 4-2-98, price 33cl = 35 BEF + 3.5 dep = 38.5 BEF

7% Dark red/brown beer with a peculiar off-white head. Treacly nose. Turned out to be quite light on the palette, surprisingly, with brown sugar/molasses edges.

(26) Petrus Triple **

Purchased "Le Cidec", 3-2-98, price 25cl = ?

7.5% Nice straw colour with sparkling (1cm) head, no strong nose. Tasty, touch of honey and a slight citrus taste too (lemon?). Not at all syrupy, but made me lick my teeth a little afterwards, trying to remove the slow but persistent bitter aftertaste.

(27) La Trappe Koningshoeven **

Purchased "Le Cidec" 5-2-98, price 33cl = 52 BEF + 3.5 dep = 55.5 BEF

8% Straw coloured, clear liquor with thin head. The nose was peculiar. I swear I could smell baked beans in there! First impressions when tasting: extremely smooth, malty drink. Definitely baked beans in there, followed immediately by strong overtones of molasses. A slight bitter finish, but not enough to shift attention from the maltiness.

(28) Moinette II **

Purchased "Le Cidec", 5-2-98, price 25cl = 37 BEF + 3.5 dep = 40.5 BEF

8.5% Slightly cloudy yellow/straw coloured beer with very thin but persistent head. Almost no nose, but upon tasting, an immediate light, refreshing, slightly bitter citrus touch. Very drinkable, and deceptively so at that.

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(29) Kwak **

Purchased in some back street bar in Brussels center, not far from La Grande Place.

Yard of Ale style. Pleasant nose. Slight bitter edges, no fruit.

(30) Rodenbach *

Fruit impression, impression on fizz: sodium bicarbonate. Citrus edge. 5%

(31) Rochefort **

Caramel nose. Very heavy (10%). Molasses impressions

(32) Hoegaarden Grand Cru **

Wheat nose. Very potent, tastes like high alcohol, but actually only 5.6% alcohol. Slight spice taste.

(33) Kriek Mort Subite*

Immediate raspberry nose, cherries follow, acid taste immediately on taste buds; sour but with gentle finish.

(34) Timmermans Kriek Lambic**

Surprisingly good, lovely red colour, nice persistent head. Sweet, of course, but not sickly.

(35) La Chouffe*

O.K., but don't remember this as a stunner.

(36) St. Feuillien***

Opaque orange, good head. Very strong and strong taste. Very slight taste of orange marmalade, Cointreau-like.

(37) St. Sebastiaan Grand Cru***

7.6% Alc. Very interesting. Honey overtones; fizzy edge.

(38) Affligem Blonde**

Golden and clear. Rich honey hints. Strong (as usual). Head dried within 3 minutes.