

DISCOVERING BIÈRE DE GARDE

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Five young brewers and beer enthusiasts discover the delights of the rather unfamiliar beer type *bière de garde*. With a travel grant from the Danish Brewers' Guild, they set out on a mission to understand both the ingredients and the brewing process used to brew the *bière de garde* style of beer. They did this by arranging visits to breweries in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France – Thiriez, Duyck and Saint Sylvestre – with a final stop at De Dolle Brouwers in Belgium. As usual, the SBR is privileged by being able to present to our readers an article on the travels supported by the travel grant from the Danish Brewers' Guild. At the same time, this article serves as the 'beer style' article of this issue.

The Scandinavian beer market in 2012 is still largely dominated by pilsner style beers. But a number of very different beer types such as stout, pale ale, IPA, trippel and wheat beer – once viewed as exotic and only to be found in specialist retailers – are now styles in demand and readily available in many supermarkets.

Bière de garde, once an endangered style, has undergone a revival in the latter half of the 20th century, though is still to a great extent unfamiliar in Scandinavia. This may be because France is not known as one of Europe's major brewing nations and is largely associated with the production of pale, pilsner-like beers coming from the region of Alsace (*bière d'Alsace*), along the German border in north-eastern France. However, in Northern France, which encompasses French Flanders, Picardy, and the Pas de Calais, you will find *bière de garde*, a beer treasured by beer connoisseurs internationally.

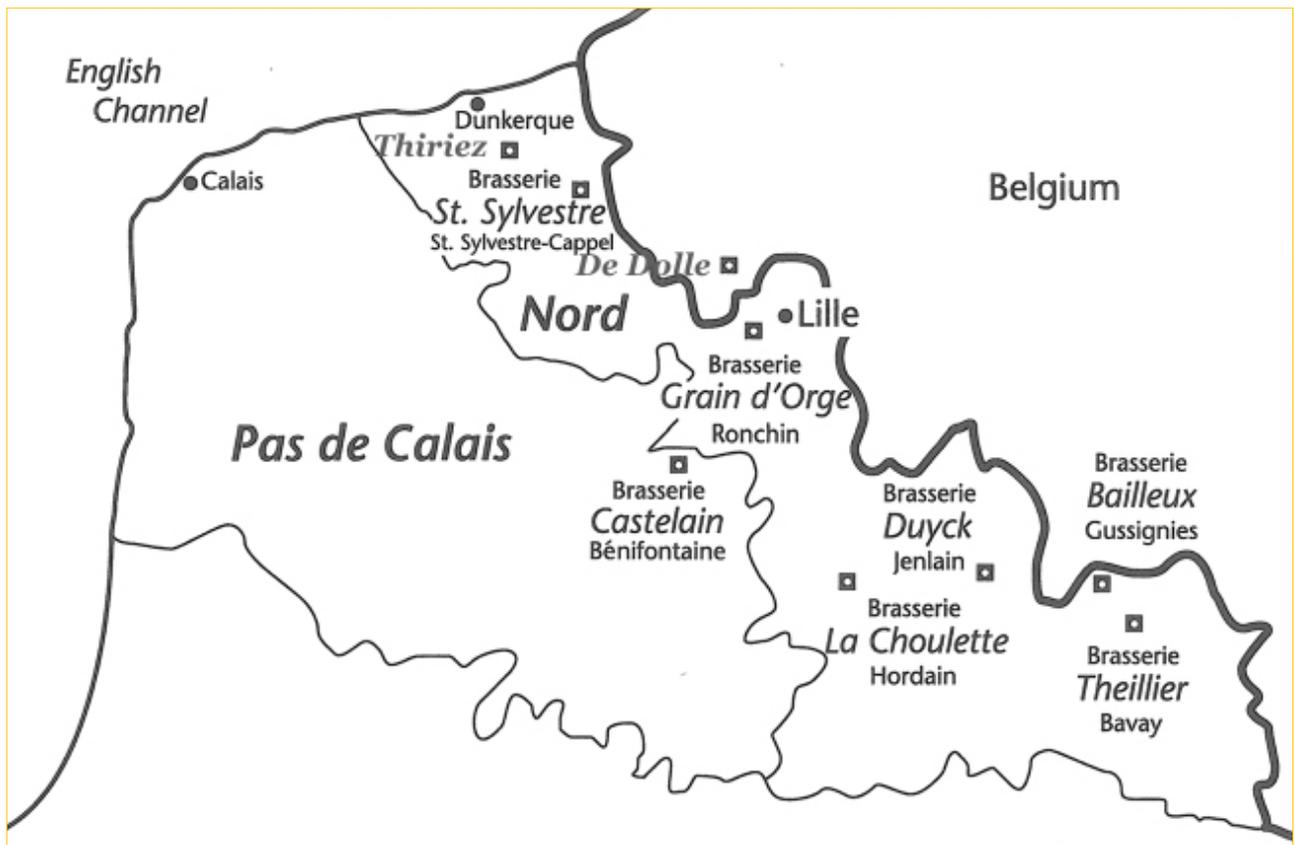
HISTORY OF BIÈRE DE GARDE

Bière de garde, which means 'beer for keeping', dates from a long time ago. Historically, all farmhouses in the northern part of France, around the region of Nord pas de Calais,

brewed strong beer in early spring and then stored the beer for consumption during the hot summer months and autumn, when it provided sustenance and refreshment for the farm labourers working in the fields.

At that time, the beers produced in the area were probably very similar in character, but after two world wars and a division of the area into French and Belgium parts, the beers evolved into two different styles. The Belgium part produces a hoppier, spicier and tarter beer, now known as *saison*, whereas the French part produces a rounder, richer, sweeter, malt-focused beer with cellar-like characters, a beer classified as *bière de garde*.

After the commercialisation of the beer industry and the introduction and demand for the cleaner, brighter lager beer, *bière de garde* became an almost forgotten beer style. Additionally, because the small farmhouses were gradually incorporated into larger, mechanised conglomerate farms, local farmhouse produced beer gradually died out. It was not until the late 1970s that this beer style experienced a revival, and this renaissance came from a most unexpected quarter.



French Farmhouse Ale Producers¹

The northern French departments (counties) of Nord and Pas de Calais host modern-day producers of bière de garde.

It was from the University of Lille, where students found the old style of bière de garde to be a worthy competitor to the Belgian specialty ale that had started to become fashionable in Paris. This drinking rebellion against the commercial and very predictable lager style gave bière de garde a somewhat cult status.

One of the principle reasons for the growing popularity of bière de garde is the characteristic way the beer is presented. The

beers are served from 75 cl champagne bottles, often sealed using traditional caged champagne corks, giving it an aesthetic and expensive look. This style of bottle presentation has now become synonymous with the beers.

The huge success was noted by smaller regional brewers who were producing low-alcohol beer, and they rapidly saw the chance to reinvent themselves as specialty beer producers instead of competing with the large national brands.

BRASSERIE DUYCK

Arriving at Brasserie Duyck, it was clear to us that the farmhouse operations long-ago were replaced by relatively modern industrial brewing processes.

Our tour guide at the brewery was Jean-Jacques Girad who vividly explained about bière de garde and the brewery's history.

Brasserie Duyck is a family affair, with a passion for beer shared by four generations of brewers: Léon, Félix, Robert, and now Raymond. It was established in 1922 by Félix in his family farmhouse in the town of Jenlain, and is now the second largest →



Brasserie Duyck

independent brewery in France, and by far the largest one making bière de garde, selling approximately 100,000 hl per year. In the 1950s, Brasserie Duyck was the first brewery to use champagne bottles for beer and this was merely a consequence of a shortage of bottles at the brewery. Félix Duyck, the owner of Jenlain at the time, was a frugal man. He saw the opportunity to overcome this shortage by using recycled bottles from the nearby Champagne district and at the same time save money. Prior to this the brewery only distributed draught beer, but the Duycks recycled empty champagne bottles to allow their customers to enjoy their beers in their own homes. Their main sales product is the original Jenlain Ambrée developed in 1922. This amber 7.5% ABV top-fermented beer undergoes a short fermentation at 18 °C followed by 4-6 weeks storage at 0 °C. Brasserie Duyck proudly uses the bière de garde label on their beer bottles and is credited with reviving the style, and encouraging countless smaller bière de garde breweries in Northern France.

BRASSERIE DE SAINT SYLVESTRE

The Brasserie de Saint Sylvestre is located just across the Belgian border in the town of Saint-Sylvestre-Cappel, where brewing dates from the 1600s. The brewery has been in the Ricour family since 1920 and a 3rd generation Ricour is currently in charge of the business. The production is 37,000 hl per year, of which 75 per cent is their main product, which is called 3 Monts. This brand is named after three nearby hills, which were too steep for a pair of horses pulling a brewer's

dray, and so defined the limit of beer distribution. This light coloured 8.5% ABV top-fermented beer undergoes four days of fermentation at 20 °C, six weeks storage at 0 °C and, finally, is bottle-conditioned at 25 °C for three weeks. The brewery does not show any interest in being associated with bière de garde. They clearly state 'we produce Brasserie Saint Sylvestre beer,' which we had plenty of opportunity to try out during the tasting session at the end of the tour.

THIRIEZ

At Brasserie Thiriez we were met by the owner, Daniel Thiriez, who was also our tour guide at the brewery. Daniel left his career as a human resources professional for a large supermarket chain in the interest of reviving the tradition of the small village brewery. In 1996, he founded the small craft brewery located in the town of Esquelbecq. The brewery is situated on the grounds that formerly housed the Poitevin farm brewery, which was active and served the local area until 1945. Today, Daniel Thiriez' brewery produces 850 hl per year, with a brewing sequence of three times per week in the brewing season. The Thiriez beer is generally top-fermented at 22 °C for six days, four weeks storage at 10-12 °C and is then bottle-conditioned at ambient temperature. Daniel Thiriez brews what he likes, and he does not associate his beer with bière de garde.

DE DOLLE BROUWERS

An oversized smiley, the easily recognisable trademark of the brewery, met us when we parked our car in front of the facade





The facade of the De Dolle Brouwers



Kris Herteleer explaining the brewhouse processes

of Bouwerij De Dolle Brouwers – ‘The Crazy Brewers’. No doubt we had arrived at the right place. Our guide for the day was the current brewer and sole owner Kris Herteleer who, together with his brother, established the brewery in 1980 in Esen in the North of Belgium near Diksmuide. Prior to this the brewery was Costenoble brewery from 1882 to 1980, and brewery/distillery owned by doctor of medicine Louis Nevejan from 1835 to 1882. There has been very limited modernisation to the brewery and it is probably the closest you will get to an authentic farmhouse brewery. The production is 1000 hl, of which 50 per cent is exported. The De Dolle Brouwers is most known for their seasonal beers which are generally top-fermented at 20-25 °C for 4-5 days, stored at 4-6 °C for 2-8 weeks and finally bottle-conditioned at 20-25 °C for 1-2 weeks. Kris feels no connections to bière de garde.

WRAPPING UP OUR TRIP

Beer enthusiasts around the world evaluate beer by style. However, if you expect this with Belgian and French beer you will most certainly be disappointed. Except for Duyck, the inventor of the bière de garde style, the brewers we met see themselves more as artists and are constantly pushing the limits of the style definition. Even though a style has been defined in the BJCP (category 16D) it can be difficult to actually fit the whole range of bière de garde into this category.

Classic bière de garde tends to be amber in colour, has a dominant malty flavour and cork/musty cellar-like notes which, for this style of beer, give a pleasant character. However, examples not showing any of these characteristics are easily found. Bière de garde can even be brewed with either ale or lager strains, often depending on which yeast the brewery has been using earlier. Ale yeast is generally fermented at lower temperatures to diminish ester formation.

It is not easy to find consistency in the style of bière de garde, but one thing that the majority of these beers seem to have in common is the long cold maturation of usually more than three weeks.



16D. BIÈRE DE GARDE (ADAPTED FROM THE BJCP STYLE GUIDELINES OF BIÈRE DE GARDE)

Aroma: Prominent malty sweetness, often with a complex, light to moderate toasty character. Low to moderate esters. Little to no hop aroma (may be a bit spicy). Commercial versions will often have a musty, woody, cellar-like character that is difficult to achieve in homebrew. Paler versions will still be malty but will lack richer, deeper aromatics and may have a bit more hops. No diacetyl.

Appearance: Three main variations exist (blond, amber and brown), so colour can range from golden blonde to reddish-bronze to chestnut brown. Clarity is good to poor, although haze is not unexpected in this type of often unfiltered beer. Well-formed head, generally white to off-white (varies by beer colour), supported by high carbonation.

Flavour: Medium to high malt flavour often with a toasty, toffee-like or caramel sweetness. Malt flavours and complexity tend to increase as beer colour darkens. Low to moderate esters and alcohol flavours. Medium-low hop bitterness provides some support, but the balance is always tilted toward the malt. The finish is medium-dry and malty. Alcohol can provide some additional dryness in the finish. Low to no hop flavour, although paler versions can have slightly higher levels of spicy hop flavour (which can also come from the yeast). Smooth, well-lagered character. No diacetyl.

Mouthfeel: Medium to medium-full body, often with a smooth, silky character. Moderate to high carbonation. Moderate alcohol, but should be very smooth and never hot.

Overall Impression: A fairly strong, malty, lagered artisanal farmhouse ale.

Comments: Three main variations are included in the style: the brown (brune), the blond (blonde), and the amber (ambre). The darker versions will have more malt character, while the paler versions can have more hops (but still are malt-focused beers). A related style is Bière de Mars, which is brewed in March (Mars) for present use and will not age as well.

Ingredients: The ‘cellar’ character in commercial examples is unlikely to be duplicated in homebrews as it comes from indigenous yeasts and moulds. Commercial versions often have a ‘corked’, dry, astringent character that is often incorrectly identified as ‘cellar-like’. Homebrews therefore are usually cleaner. Base malts vary by beer colour, but usually include pale, Vienna and Munich types. Darker versions will have richer malt complexity and sweetness from crystal-type malts. Lager or ale yeast fermented at cool ale temperatures, followed by long cold conditioning. Soft water. Floral or spicy continental hops.

Vital Statistics:

OG	FG	IBUs	SRM	ABV
1.060-1.080	1.012-1.018	20-30	6-19	6-8%

Commercial Examples: Jenlain (brown), St. Amand (brown), Ch'Ti Brun (brown), Ch'Ti Blond (blond), La Choulette (all three versions), La Choulette Bière des Sans Culottes (blonde), Saint Sylvestre 3 Monts (blonde), Biere Nouvelle (brown), Castelain (blonde), Jade (amber), Brasseurs Bière de Garde (amber).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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REFERENCES

1. Farmhouse Ales, Culture and Craftsmanship in the Belgian Tradition, Phil Markowski (2004).
2. The Oxford Companion to Beer, Garrett Oliver (2012).
3. BJCP Style Guidelines of Bière de Garde (shortened) <http://www.bjcp.org/styles04/Category16.php#style16D>