

Article by Belgian Brewer's, Director, Mr. Philippe Buisseret
Roots and wings: the Belgian brewing sector

A true product of Belgian soil, beer is firmly rooted in the history of our land. There was a time when every town and village had at least one brewery. Sometimes beer was brewed in monasteries and abbeys, sometimes on farms once the barley, wheat or hops had been harvested.

Breweries were completely integrated into social life and brewers were always well thought of and appreciated.

From time immemorial, beer has been embedded in our day-to-day life, in our cultural traditions, our cooking and our diet. Beer was included in our meals; it was, and still is, a staple. Some Belgian beers have been described as 'liquid bread'.

Beer has even saved lives, during the time of the plague when water was contaminated.

Belgian beers and their brewers still benefit from these roots and traditions. Belgian brewers are still very much valued today and we are proud of them. But whereas recipes and ingredients have not changed much, working methods and techniques have evolved over time. Brewing was an art; now it is a skill, although still based on exclusive know-how.

Traditionally, the Belgian brewing market has always provided an astounding variety and diversity of beers. They can be thirst-quenching or for tasting; they can be top-fermented ales, lambics, or beers re-fermented in the bottle; pilsner beers, white beers, Trappist beers, and fruit beers; beers from abbeys, 'gueuze' beers and special Belgian amber beers; in all, more than 400 brands and as many sub-brands are available. This variety and diversity has always existed and characterises the wealth contained in the words 'Belgian beer'. However, the qualities that truly earn Belgian beers their reputation and renown are, of course, their personality and character.

A local or regional product to begin with, Belgian beer has taken wing and has encountered more and more enthusiasts abroad. One of every two bottles finds its way to other countries, mainly in Europe, but also to the United States, Japan, China, India...

Given this increasing demand, extending first beyond the limits of the village and then even the nation's borders, brewers have invested in modern and more efficient equipment. Beer production grows year on year.

In addition, beer, as a food product, needs to conform to strict requirements of hygiene, food safety and traceability. Beer, made with pure and natural ingredients, has obviously developed along with changing standards.

Protecting the environment requires certain measures and precautions, investments and alternative working methods, in order to reduce as much as possible any potential harm to the environment. Belgian brewers have all opted for production techniques that conform to sustainable development parameters.

For example, ten years ago about 20 litres of water were needed to make one litre of beer. Today, modern breweries have managed to reduce water consumption to between six and seven litres per litre of beer produced. Any CO₂ emissions from the fermentation process are recovered and reused in the ensuing stages of brewing or in the bottling process.

But Belgian brewers are also responsible producers when it comes to consumption of alcoholic beverages. Beer is a social drink, which can sometimes lend itself to abuse, or to inappropriate use within certain situations (under-16s, drivers, pregnant women, in the work place, etc.). Beer is, nonetheless, a drink of moderation: with its low rate of alcohol in relation to volume, it does not encourage excess.

For several years all beer advertisements have added the slogan: "Beer brewed with love should be enjoyed with wisdom". Belgian Brewers have actively been involved in the BOB campaign (don't drink and drive, designated driver) since it was started in Belgium 13 years ago, and this has now spread to 17 other European countries. Other initiatives are under way to discourage sale of or access to beer for under-16s. Awareness campaigns at gynaecology clinics and in specialised magazines will inform mothers-to-be of the potential risks from drinking beer before, during and after pregnancy. We are also looking into the possibility of a campaign targeting alcohol misuse in the work-place.

Brewers will always prefer to see ten people drink a beer each than one person drinking ten beers. They will always recommend social enjoyment over drunkenness.

Beer is fun, but it's also a serious business. And the brewers take their business, their role and their social responsibility seriously.

