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Alsace: Europe's Great Forgotten Beer Culture

Feature by Will Hawkes | Jan 2019 | Issue #133



Illustration by Joe Waldron

Speaking on the day that Heineken bought Fischer-Adelshoffen in 1996, the manager of the Fischerstüb restaurant lamented the impending takeover of one of Alsace's most famous brewing names.

Our brewing tradition is going to disappear," Bruno Fischer told France 2's news program that evening, February 13 from behind the bar at the bierstüb that stands in the shadow of the Fischer brewery. "It's a family, a soul that will no longer be there. Once it's gone it will be impossible to replace."

Twenty years on, his words have lost none of their power. Heineken shut the Fischer brewery in 2009, hot on the heels of the closures of Adelshoffen (2000) and another iconic Schiltigheim brewery, Schutzenberger (2006). It was a disastrous era for the northern Strasbourg suburb that, as the painted sign outside the Fischerstüb says, has long been known in France as the "City of Brewers."

Known in France, but not elsewhere. Alsace, which borders Germany on the country's eastern flank, is virtually ignored when Europe's great beer cultures are discussed in the English-speaking world. The 2011 *Oxford Companion to Beer* includes articles on such essential topics as "grits" and "labeling information," but look for Alsace and you'll search in vain. When Anglo-Saxon connoisseurs think of French beer, it's Bière de Garde, the strong ale of Northern France, that typically comes to mind.

It's a view of French beer that ignores the facts. Alsace is France's brewing powerhouse: Around 60 percent of the beer drunk in the country is brewed here, the vast majority of its hops are grown here, and its most famous names, from Kronenbourg to Fischer, were born here.

And the region is also currently enjoying a revival: More than 40 brasseries artisanales have joined the handful of remaining big breweries over the past few years. "There has been a real renaissance," says Michel Debus, the 91-year-old doyen of Alsatian brewing and the man

breweries. Founded in 1640, Meteor produces around 450,000 hectoliters (roughly 383,000 barrels) a year in the small town of Hochfelden, some 15 miles northwest of Strasbourg on the Zorn River.

Recent years have seen the brewery embrace modernity with the opening of Villa Meteor, a visitor center that includes a hop garden, a tiny barley field, the former family home of its owners, the Haag family, and a new range of bieres ephemeres, seasonal beers such as Supernova, a white IPA.

"It's dry-hopped with Cascade and top-fermented," explains Michel Haag, the dapper 71-year-old who has run Meteor since 1975, as he takes a sip. "We couldn't have made this type of beer a few years ago, but the market for beer in France has changed. Now we can do a lot more—people want more varied flavors."

Although characterized by greater subtlety of flavor than its counterparts in the US or UK, Supernova is still quite a leap for a brewery like Meteor, whose reputation has been built on pale lager. In that they're far from alone; Pils has long been king in Alsace. Alsace's beer history stretches back into the 13th century, but its reputation was really made in the Victorian era. It was then that many of Strasbourg's breweries left the medieval constraints of the city center and set up shop in its suburbs, most notably Schiltigheim to the north. The arrival of a railway line to Paris in 1852 gave Alsatian brewers access to the capital, and they thrived.

Germany annexed Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-German war of 1870, but when Alsace returned to L'Hexagone at the end of World War I in 1918, a new golden era dawned. A post WW II campaign during which Alsatian brewers collectively labeled their products with the term *Biere d'Alsace* cemented the idea of Alsace as beer country in French minds.



Illustration by Joe Waldron

It also cemented Pils as the beer of Alsace, which may be why, as Haag admits, there is so little acknowledgment of Alsatian brewing outside France: there's no unique style. "Ours is essentially a German tradition," says Haag. (German terms like *stammtisch*, a table in a bar where regulars gather, are used here, too).

Meteor's Pils, which actually has Czech roots and celebrated its 90th birthday in 2017, is emblematic of the way pale lager has long been brewed in Alsace. Made with the classic local hop, *Strisselspalt*, a mash bill that's 20 percent corn, a single decoction step, and three weeks' lagering, it is soft and round in the mouth with a bitterness that is uncommon for French pale lagers.

"It's the queen of our beers," says Haag. "We've had huge success with it." And the corn? "The Germans say it is not pure [to use corn], but what is purity? How is barley more pure than maize? We use it because it makes the beer a little lighter."

In the company canteen, an old advertising poster bears a confident statement: *Alsaciens nous sommes, Alsaciens nous resterons* (Alsaticans we are, Alsaticans we shall remain). It shows a traditional *bierstub*, bedecked with Meteor branding, squashed between two huge glass skyscrapers representing Heineken and Carlsberg, the multi-national companies that control the region's major breweries.

"It was a little joke," says Haag, but he's deadly serious about Meteor's independence. "We are the last big independent family brewery in Alsace. I have fought all my life for the independence of this brewery. When I was 15 [in the early 1960s] there were 21 independent family breweries in Alsace. For more than 10 years now, we've been the only ones."

plans to revive the still-extant brewery site—certified a historic monument by the French government—were until recently a going concern. Contract-brewed Schutzenberger beers reappeared in the market for a short while, but the premature death of president Marie-Lorraine Muller in 2016 seems to have ended hope of a more permanent return.

Other revived breweries have fared better. The road leading to Schutzenberger's brewery in Schiltigheim is called Rue Perle, after the brewery that stood there until 1971, La Perle. The building itself is long gone, but the company has returned to life, on a trading estate in the south of Strasbourg. [Bieres Artisanales Perle](#) is the brainchild of Christian Artzner, the great-great grandson of Pierre Hoeffel, who originally founded the company in 1882. Established as a contract brewery in 2009, it has been based since 2015 in a sizeable unit on Rue de l'Ardèche, where Perle makes around 3,000 hectoliters (2,500 barrels) of beer per year.

Artzner, 40, got the brewing bug courtesy of books by Michael Jackson and British homebrew expert Graham Wheeler, and went on to study brewing at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Scotland. Today Perle makes 14 different beers, but its Pils, whose resolute bitterness (35 IBUs) and lack of corn distinguish it in Alsace, represents just under 40 percent of production. "We have one foot in the past and one in the future," he says. "We want to be part of this incredible movement, but we also have a beautiful Alsatian heritage."

Pils is not the only Perle beer to have made an impact, however. Alsace produces both beer and wine—unusual in Europe—although the cultures have not traditionally mingled. One of Artzner's beers, [Dans Les Vignes](#) (In the Vines), an annual release made with Alsatian grapes, brings grain and grape together by adding must in the whirlpool.

"This year we brewed two batches with Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, and one batch with Sylvaner," explains Artzner.

The bottles declare themselves a "Hommage à l'Alsace," a good way of pointing out that they're uniquely Alsatian in a way Pils has never been. "It's created a lot of interest from people who wouldn't normally be interested: sommeliers, wine journalists, some customers, too," Artzner says. "It has become a flagship beer for us."

Another brewer who knows something about the grape is Benjamin Pastwa; he set up [Bendorf](#) (a portmanteau of Ben, his name, and Neudorf, the neighborhood where it's based) in 2013 having worked in wine in France and Australia. Pastwa, 34, began as a homebrewer and has enjoyed success with hoppy beers such as [Queen of Langstross](#), a West Coast-style IPA.

"I'm inspired by what's happening in the US and UK," he says. "People here are more and more receptive to my beers: before it would be, 'It's too bitter.' Now when we do a more classic beer, the response is 'bof!' [a French exclamation denoting lack of enthusiasm]."

One of his most interesting beers is currently aging in a wine barrel at the brewery: it's a sour ale, made with Pinot Noir and Riesling grapes in collaboration with an Alsace winemaker, Kumpf & Meyer. "The two worlds—wine and beer—are starting to come together," Pastwa says. "It's happening."

And Bendorf's beers can be found at a growing number of bars and delicatessens in Strasbourg, most notably Le Grincheux, where a young crowd can choose from more than 20 taps. Strasbourg is a good beer-drinking city, even if many of the most famous restaurants (like Chez Yvonne, the winstub where former French president Jacques Chirac and German counterpart Helmut Kohl shared plates of choucroute in the 1990s) remain devoted to wine.

The city has more than its fair share of brewing ghosts, too. There's Lohkas, a restaurant where a sign that features a six-pointed star and barrel designates it as a former brewery, and Kronenbourg's former home in the suburb of Cronenbourg (the K was adopted because the owners thought it made the product sound more German, and therefore of better quality; Kronenbourg is now brewed elsewhere in Alsace). The most poignant reminder of the past is Schutzenberger's once iconic bar, with its balcony overlooking Place Kleber in the heart of Strasbourg.

A few doors down at [Brasserie Kohler-Rehm](#), beers from [Brasserie Storig](#) are available. The brewery itself is out in Schiltigheim, where it's part of the modern Brasserie Michel Debus brewpub housed in the Villa Weber, the last remnant of the Adelshoffen brewery. It's a modern, airy space, with a 10-hectoliter (8.5 barrel) brew kit on display. There are six year-round beers and regular specials, all unfiltered and unpasteurized, including a pale lager, a Witbier, and a top-fermented Blonde Ale.

Germany to accept foreign beers for sale that weren't Reinheitsgebot-compliant. He also pioneered bières aromatisées (flavored beers) in France—most famously Desperados, the Tequila-flavored beer now made by Heineken that is currently enjoying renewed success around the world.

Debus—a tidy man whose trademark lavalliere, an old-fashioned tie, is reflected in Storig's logo with a stork sporting the same neckwear—is pleased by what he sees around Alsace. "There is much more choice now," he says, matter-of-factly. "That's what the consumers want. Drinkers want more variety."

Few know more about the traditions of Alsatian brewing than Debus. He points out that beer and wine have traditionally been divided by geography and religion in Alsace. "Here [in Schiltigheim] we're right on the frontier—south of here it's wine, above here it's beer," he says. "The brewers have always been Protestant. You have in the south the winstubs; in the north they're bierstubs. It's curious, but it's true."

A short walk from Brasserie Michel Debus is the last of Schiltigheim's five big breweries, the Heineken-owned Brasserie de L'Esperance. There are few better places to get an idea of the grandeur of Alsace's brewing history than in its brewhouse, where 1.4 million hectoliters of beer (most of which is Heineken; about 160,000, or 136,000 barrels is Fischer) is made every year. Built in 1932, it's a symphony of copper, tiles, and stained-glass windows; more ballroom than brewhouse.

There have been consistent rumors that Heineken, which has two other plants in France, was planning to close L'Esperance, but a recent cash injection of €7.1 million (\$8 million), which will increase capacity to 1.7 million hectoliters (1.45 million barrels), has put that idea to rest. Fischer was rebranded and relaunched in 2014, and is now made using only Alsatian hops. "Heineken is strongly linked to its Alsatian roots," says site director Stéphane Crépel. "This was the first brewery Heineken bought in France, in 1972; we've invested €35 million since 2010. It's a key site for us."

The Fischerstub, too, appears to have a bright future: although most of the Fischer brewery is destined to be redeveloped, both it and the huge, iconic Fischer malthouse which greets those driving into Schiltigheim from the south are to be preserved, by order of the local government.

On a recent lunchtime not unlike that in 1996, the wood-paneled Fischerstub buzzed with contentment as customers ate hearty Alsatian food like tarte flambée and drank Fischer Blonde. Schiltigheim may not be quite the "city of brewers" it was in the past, but things are looking up. All across Alsace, in fact, a great and often ignored brewing culture is thriving once again. ■

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