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Brugse Zot

Brouwerij De Halve Maan, Brugge, Western Flanders, Belgium

6.0% ABV \$/330 mL

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Beer styles can be important for helping drinker to know what to expect out of a beer. Styles and their parameters – both quantitative and qualitative – can also help a brewer in deciding how to develop a recipe or how to guide the beer along in its brewing and fermentation processes. Following these style guidelines is typically a German approach, and many American and English brewers subscribe as well. It is a delightful coincidence, and perhaps an insight into cultural psyches, that Germany and Belgium share a common border. In Belgium, brewers ignore, toy with, and sometimes downright condemn the notion of beer styles.

Belgium is a small nation with over a hundred breweries and hundreds of different beers. Brewers are proud to brew – and drinkers are proud to drink – what tastes good to them. Each beer is judged on its own personality. The several Belgian beer styles that have been codified by connoisseur and judging associations are an attempt, after the fact, to make sense of the vast and expressive Belgian beer landscape. Beers listed among a style are often just as easily listed in another style, and quite often the style guidelines are loose so as to accommodate a few outlying or “problematic” beers.

In a country of multiple ethnicities and languages – and beers – Belgians identify strongly with their regions, and a trait common to the people and their beers is a sense of humility and fun. To Belgians, Brugse Zot is a Brugse beer first and foremost, a Belgian beer second, and a Belgian-style golden ale last. Brugge (Bruges in French) is in the Flemish-speaking part of the country, and Brugse Zot is Flemish for “Fool of Brugge.” The name references the time the Austrian Emperor visited Brugge during an annual religious procession that caused great activity and tumult. When the Emperor was told of a need for an asylum for the mentally-ill, his tongue-in-cheek solution was that if the city gates were locked, the entire city could be the madhouse.

Brewing in Brugge since 1546, De Halve Maan (the Half Moon) created this beer only in the last decade. Its golden color, dry finish, soft citrus flavors, and 6% abv make it hard to pigeon-hole into a style. In fact, that it was entered in the World Beer Cup’s catch-all Belgian- and French-style Ale category tells of its resistance to classification; that it took home the gold medal tells of its superior quality.

This beer is built on soft, pale malts that lend a golden color and flavors of bread and hay. German hops add a gently balancing bitterness, along with hints of parsley, sage, lemon rind, and black pepper. The Belgian ale yeast offers fruitiness with minimal spice, displaying a wealth of lemon, meyer lemon, and lime notes, with soft hints of peach as well. There’s a whiff of bubble gum in the finish, too. Finally, the spritzy carbonation, lightly-minerally brewing water, and yeasty citrus notes combine to remind me a little bit of a certain “lymon” soft drink. Enjoy Buges Zot in a tulip glass or a wine glass – anything that will focus the bouquet and elevate it above your hand to appreciate its golden color – at around 45-55 degrees. The cooler it is, the more minerally and grassy it will be; warmer it is, the fruitier it will be.

This beer is gentle enough to pair with delicate foods like lettuces, breads, fish, and poultry, and complex enough to tease out nuance from herbs, salt, black pepper, vinegars, and other seasonings. On this beer’s dance card are a green salad with fennel, parmigiano, croutons, and a vinaigrette; gingery, coconut-y tom kha soup with tofu or chicken; and of course, the Brugse fave, beer-steamed moules and frites with a spritz of lemon.



Concentrated Evil

Fifty Fifty Brewing Company, Truckee, California, USA

11.0% ABV \$/22 oz

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If Belgian beer is a refutation of style parameters, then what makes it Belgian? The Belgian style is to brew beers with personality, and for a beer to showcase unique flavors, aromas and texture from the ingredients and processes that create it. Belgian beer is a collaboration among the water, malts, hops, and yeast (and sometimes other ingredients) that make up the beer.

Belgian beers are mostly ales. There are certainly notable Belgian lagers out there, but the nation and its brewing heritage is known for ales. The difference between an ale and a lager is the species of yeast used to ferment the grain sugars prepared by the brewer. During fermentation, lager species produce alcohol and carbon dioxide, and any other flavors they produce dissipate from the beer during secondary fermentation. On the other hand, when ale species ferment sugars, they create alcohol, carbon dioxide, and a wealth of other flavors, including esters (fruity), phenols (spicy, medicinal), and alcohols (floral, medicinal). These flavors contribute to the complexity of ales – they're a rounded, nuanced interplay of malt, hops, and fermentation flavors. Lagers are "cleaner" tasting because they show off the flavors of the malt and hops without complex flavors from the fermentation.

Belgian ales are commonly fruity and spicy from their yeasts, and sometimes actual fruits and spices are added to the beer, too. The complex flavors of the yeast are cherished, and must be anticipated by the brewer and balanced with the flavors of the malt and hops. In Concentrated Evil, FiftyFifty Brewing Co. owner/brewmaster Todd Ashman has done a fabulous job of eking nuance from his ingredients and encouraging artful interplay among them, brewing a beer with great personality in the process.

The personality of Todd's beers are what have made FiftyFifty a year-round gathering place in Truckee, CA, a ski town near Lake Tahoe whose businesses thrive on the seasonal visitors. Also famous for his barrel-aged Eclipse imperial stouts aged in Pappy Van Winkle, Four Roses, and Evan Williams bourbon barrels, Todd brews a line-up of enjoyable American-style craft beers at his FiftyFifty brewpub.

If you really want to classify it, you might call Concentrated Evil a Belgian-style strong dark ale. It's Belgian-style (with fruity Belgian yeast); it's strong (11% abv); and it's dark (but not pitch black). That descriptor leaves out fact that it's brewed with brown sugar and raisins, and it leaves out the notes of toffee and chocolate from the caramelized and roasted malts, the black pepper from the hops, and the plum and mission fig notes from the Belgian ale yeast. Furthermore, this is a masterful Belgian-style ale because of the layers of flavor that develop further. The dark malts and brown sugar combine with the peppery hops produce notes of leather and tobacco leaf, the sweet brown sugar and the high alcohols add notes of licorice root, the high alcohols along with the fruity yeast and raisins produce hints of plum wine, brandy, menthol, and roses. There's a lot going on with this beer, and that's what gives it such personality. It's a story in every sip.

This beer is low in carbonation, since too much would reduce the richness, confuse the flavors, and make the alcohol too present and hot. This beer is meant to be served in a snifter or stemmed tulip glass – anything that will concentrate the bouquet and allow for your hand to heat up the beer. Enjoy this beer around 60 degrees, just a bit colder than room temp. It pairs well with rich, sweet, dark foods, like a chocolate lava cake with vanilla ice cream and fig compote. However, it's perfect on its own as a digestif or a night cap – a great way to finish a meal or finish a day.