



April 2011

Schneider Weisse

Privatweissbierbrauerei G. Schneider & Sohn, Kelheim, Germany

5.4% ABV \$4.50/500mL

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This month, we study two original types of wheat beer: Bavarian-style hefeweizen and Belgian-style witbier. The term wheat beer is a bit misleading, since there are many different types of wheat beer, and it is actually not the wheat that lends these beers their particularly salient characteristics. Wheat is a grain that is fairly neutral when used in brewing, lending a beer just a bit of acidity and a little extra protein (important for head retention).

In medieval Bavaria, where wheat grows as well as barley, it was not uncommon to brew beers with wheat in them. Over the centuries, a style of wheat beer coalesced that was amber in color, cloudy with white yeast, just barely bitter from the hops, and fruity and spicy from the use of a bold ale yeast. Flavors of banana, clove, vanilla, and bubble gum dominate this style. This beer was called weissbier -- German for "white beer" -- because of how the light-colored yeast, suspended in the beer, appeared to brighten the color of the beer. In the southern German dialect, this beer is also called hefeweizen, with hefe meaning "yeast" and weizen meaning "wheaten."

The popularity of hefeweizen waxed and waned over the centuries, and by the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was succumbing to the incredible popularity of pilsners and helles lagers. Georg Schneider negotiated with the Bavarian state for the rights to brew weissbier, and in 1872 opened Privatweissbierbrauerei G. Schneider und Sohn, dedicated solely to brewing wheat beer. At the time, technological advances to dry malted grains without roasting them led to lighter- and lighter-colored beers, but Schneider's recipe remained faithful to the slight amber color and caramelly palate of the older style of weissbier. The Schneider brewery now brews several different sub-styles of weissbier, and there are other German breweries brewing excellent weissbier, as well. Fortunately for us, the style of beer was saved and has since regained its popularity, now accounting for about 25% of the beer consumed in Bavaria.

When pouring your Schneider Weisse, be sure to use a large, tall glass that can accommodate a crowning head of moussey foam. This beer is very aromatic, and as such it is well carbonated, to allow the aromas to burst forth from the beer. A rich head on top of the beer will allow you to trap in a lot of those aromas, and you'll be able to get a fresh whiff with each sip. This beer is a celebration of yeast, and typically Germans will pour 80% of the beer into their glass, then vigorously swirl the bottle (or even roll it on the table) to rouse all the yeast from the bottom of the bottle, and then pour it all into their glass. Note the shine of the yeast as it shimmers against the caramel-colored beer. Flavors of banana, clove, vanilla, and bubble gum are present, and you might notice hints of cotton candy, smoke, and wax, too. Underneath all the crazy spice and fruit notes from the yeast is a beer that tastes bready and yeasty, with subtle notes of toast, honey and caramel.

This is a beer whose flavors would seem to be a perfect match with desserts, and while it's a nice partner to banana bread pudding or apple crisp, it's surprisingly great with pork, smoked game, vegetables, and herbs. Try it with a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, whole wheat pasta with basil pesto, or a carnitas taco with onions, and cilantro. And, you're welcome to garnish it with a lemon, but most Germans refuse, as the citrusy tang overpowers the subtleties of the yeast and the lemon's oils will ruin the beer's head.



Orchard White

The Bruery, Placentia, California

5.7% ABV \$9.00/750mL

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West of the regimented German brewing industry lies the less-structured Belgian brewing tradition. There, brewers also have brewed wheat beer for centuries. However, these beers taste very different from those of Bavaria. Witbier is Flemish and Dutch for “white beer,” and this descriptor refers to the opalescent cloudiness of the beer. These beers are unfiltered, but it is not only the yeast that causes their hazy appearance: there is also a fair amount of starch, as well.

To most brewers, starch haze is a flaw because it mucks up the beer’s appearance, and it means that there is unconverted starch in the beer. During the brew, starch -- present in all grain but unfermentable by brewers yeast -- is converted enzymatically into sweet, simple sugars that are the “food” for the yeast. It’s the brewer’s job to convert and liberate as much sugar from the grain as possible so that fermentation can occur, and is the measure of brewhouse efficiency. In witbier, however, unconverted starches are celebrated, as they lend a luxurious mouth feel to what would otherwise be a very light, thin beer. The technique used to brew witbiers is known as turbid mashing, and it is the result of nineteenth century Dutch and Belgian taxation of breweries based on mash tun capacity. To avoid paying too many taxes, witbier brewers would pack their mash tuns so full of malted and unmalted wheat and barley that a proper conversion of starches was inhibited, and what some brewers would call inefficient bred a style of beer whose texture is as important as its flavor.

As in weissbier, witbier is minimally hopped so that bitterness does not interfere with nuance from the malt, yeast, and spices. Witbiers are commonly spiced with bitter orange peel and coriander, and sometimes grains of paradise and herbs. Hops do not grow as widely in the Low Countries as they do in Germany, and the robust colonial spice trade brought new and exotic flavor sources to Belgian brewers. The spices in witbier are particularly tasty with the expressive yeast used to ferment the beer. Witbier yeasts can impart hints of earth, button mushrooms, lemon, lime, and sometimes a whiff of smoke.

Orchard White is a great example of a witbier, and it’s brewed by an upstart craft brewery in Orange County. Founded by Patrick Rue, The Bruery is only three years old, and already is famous across the globe for its experimental beers. Beers aged in spirits barrels, with upwards of 12% ABV, and with exotic spices are de rigueur for The Bruery. Orchard White fits into the lineup as a kind of a gateway, session beer, one that’s delicate and balanced, but with beautiful layers and subtlety that hint at the flavors preened by their more experimental beers.

As with weissbier, pour Orchard White vigorously to build an aromatic, rocky head on the beer; a snifter or wine glass will support this beer nicely. The beer’s bouquet is oranges and geraniums overlaying an earthy, briny foundation. The beer is spiced subtly with lavender, which lends violet and fresh sawdust notes at first and then really blossoms as the beer warms. All of these aromas are present in the flavor, too, along with additional flavors like bread, brie cheese, white pepper, and even a little root beer (sarsaparilla, wintergreen). The texture is rich and marmalade-y, but finishes refreshingly with a bit of tartness from the wheat. This beer is fantastic at the beginning of a meal, and works great with soft cheeses, vegetables, breads, and shellfish. It is great with raw oysters or a salad of greens, chevre, and meyer lemon vinaigrette, and is a classic when used to steam mussels, leeks, and black pepper.