



September 2011

Fröhliches Zeltfest and Happy Oktoberfest! Liters of beer are being drunk by the millions in Munich, it's hop and barley harvest time, and the weather in San Francisco is finally reliably sunny and warm. To celebrate, this month we'll taste two Bavarian lagers that are specialties within the lager world.

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Mönchshof Schwarzbier

Kulmbacher Brauerei, Kulmbach, Bavaria, Germany

4.9% ABV \$/500 mL

In a country that has perfected the art of the pale lagers, it is refreshing that schwarzbier still garners a following. German drinkers and brewers, ever precise, draw very fine quantitative distinctions among pale lagers such as German pilsner, Bohemian pilsner, international pilsner, gold lager, Dortmunder export, and Munich helles -- beers that most drinkers across the world would have a hard time seeing, smelling, or tasting much difference among. However, among clean, crisp, light-bodied lagers, there remains a beer style that is markedly different: schwarzbier.

Sometimes called a black pilsner, schwarzbier is as easy-drinking as it is dark in color. Close your eyes and drink it, and you'd never think that it's the color of coffee. The idea that dark beers are full-bodied, heavy, and high-alcohol is a complete fallacy, and Mönchshof Schwarzbier is here to prove it. Modern marketing by pale lager brewers, particularly those in the United States, tries to convince drinkers across the globe that a good beer is a beer that is very easy to drink -- light-bodied, light-colored, crystal clear, not bitter, and refreshing. Guess what life-sustaining beverage that best describes? The argument follows that the more a beer differs from water in look and taste, the less refreshing and worse tasting it is. Well, for my time and money, when I want to drink water, I'll drink water, and when I want to drink beer, I'll drink beer that tastes like malt, hops, and yeast.

The color of a beer comes from the color of the grains that are used in the brew. To make a beer, brewers allow yeast to consume and ferment grain sugars in water. (Wine is similar, except that the yeast are fermenting fruit (grape) sugars.) To get those grain sugars into the water, the brew day starts by steeping grain -- usually malted barley -- in hot water to draw out the grain's starches and sugars. The flavor and color of the grain are leached into the water, too, though, and this determines the color and malty flavor of the finished beer. If you use pale, kilned malt, then your beer will be golden in color. If malt that has been caramelized or roasted in any way is added to the water, then the darker color, sweeter sugars, and myriad of caramel and melanoidin flavors will color and flavor the resultant beer. What makes a beer "heavy" is the amount of grain that is added, not the color of the grain. So, a schwarzbier is a light-bodied beer because it is not brewed with a large amount of grain, and it's dark because some of the barley malt that it is brewed with is darkly roasted. To decrease acridly roasty flavors, schwarzbiers are often brewed with de-husked black malt, since it's the malt kernels' husks that burn first during roasting.

Pour your Mönchshof Schwarzbier into a tall pilsner glass. Allow it to build a layer of thick, tan foam on top of the black beer. The aroma is roasty, peppery, subtly smoky, and finishes with a whiff of sulphur, a trait not uncommon among lagers. Upon the first sip, it greets the palate with an amazingly clean flavor, devoid of fruity esters or heavy roast. Its body is fluffy with brady malt and fine carbonation, and its finish is lean and dry. While there is some slight hop bitterness, and some hints of roasted mushrooms and Tootsie Roll, this beer is all about clean flavor.

Like many German beers, this beer is great with sausages and grilled meats. Keep in mind that it's not a super-assertive beer, though, and consider saving the bratwursts and smoked pork chops for a bigger beer. Mönchshof Schwarzbier's lightly roasty profile will add depth to lighter, sweeter sausages like bockwurst and weisswurst, its lean finish cutting through the sausages' fattiness. It's also light enough to be great with a green salad with rye croutons, radishes, herbs, and a mustard vinaigrette (and feel free to add some salty feta or grilled haloumi cheese).



Helles Schlenkerla Lager

Brauerei Heller-Trum, Bamberg, Bavaria, Germany

4.3% ABV \$/500 mL

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The city of Bamberg is in northwestern Bavaria in the region known as upper Franconia. It's home to 70,000 people, 14 breweries, and a large malting house that sells malted barley to breweries worldwide. To say that it is a beer-centric city is an understatement. Bavaria is Germany's wealthiest, most Catholic, and most conservative state, and the farther from Munich and the more rural, the more conservative it becomes. So, to say that Bamberg is staunchly proud of its brewing heritage and tradition is also an understatement. As such, Bamberg is home to a vestige of brewing history: smoke beer. Two breweries in Bamberg are dedicated to brewing rauchbier (*rauch* means "smoke" in German). For some beer drinkers, the smoky flavors of rauchbier are an acquired taste, but for most it's a beer either loved or hated. Rauchbiers can smell strikingly similar to smoked meats, and at least one German maltster I know is not a big fan of rauchbier, calmly explaining that "I like smoked ham in my eggs but not in my beer."

There was a period for centuries during which most beer was smoky to some degree. After the barley harvest, the grain would be taken to the malting house, where it was steeped in water to partially germinate it over the course of a few days. The resulting malted barley (packed with germination enzymes needed in brewing) needed to be dried to keep the kernels from spoiling or from growing into barley plants. For centuries, the technique for drying grain was to place it over open flames, using the heat to drive out the moisture. This could impart varying degrees of smokiness, caramel, and roast to the malt. Thus, for centuries in the middle ages, Renaissance, and into the 1700s, beers were often dark or amber-colored and tinged with smoke. As malting technology advanced, paler and less smoky malts became more consistently available to brewers, and by the late-1700s through the mid-1800s, beers such as pale ales in England and pilsners in Bohemia were displacing the darker, smokier, phenolic porters, dunkles, and rauchbiers.

As beer has continued to modernize, cultures steeped in beer tradition have fought to hold onto their local beers, and the preservationist successes allow us to enjoy beers that may seem antiquated or esoteric, but which are very much everyday beers for some people. Bamberg's rauchbier is one of these success stories, and while the beers enjoy benefits of progress, such as predictable fermentations and sanitation, they still leave a proud foot in a woodsier, smokier past.

Schlenkerla -- the brand of the beers from Brauerei Heller-Trum -- is a term in the local dialect for a stumbling or limping person, and it refers to a particular patron in centuries past who either had an awkward gait throughout the day, or, perhaps, developed one each night after some beers at the bräustubl. Schlenkerla beers are often aggressively smoky -- much more so than the rauchbiers of nearby Brauerei Spezial across the River Regnitz -- and are prized for their phenolic aroma and flavor. Phenols are a set of aroma compounds that range from the clove and bubble gum notes of a Bavarian weissbier to the medicinal, resinous, oily hints in peated Scotch whisky. Schlenkerla's phenols are more like those in Scotch (some people even pick up notes of Band-Aid and iodine in the beers). Heller-Trum smokes its malt in-house in ovens fueled by local beech wood and uses this malt in its amber Märzen and caramelly Urbock. As a less smoky alternative, the straw-colored Helles is brewed without smoked malt, but still develops a smoky tinge, perhaps from brewery walls and tanks permeated with smoke, or perhaps from reusing yeast that has previously fermented rauchbier. (The brewery also makes a doppelbock brewed with malts smoked over oak wood, which imparts sweeter, oilier smoke notes than those of the beech wood.)

Helles Schlenkerla Lager pours a brilliant, straw-golden color and builds a rocky white head above sparkling carbonation. Use a straight-sided pilsner glass (an inwardly-tapered goblet may not allow the beer to breathe off the sulfur from its lager fermentation). The nose is full of grass, lemon, hay in autumn and is hauntingly smoky. It drinks easily, with more grassy flavors from the noble hops, minimal bitterness, plush maltiness, and more smoke in the aftertaste. This beer is a natural partner with smoked cheeses and grilled meats. But, for a little variety, try it with foods that are lighter, salty, and mineral -- grilled clams with parsley and salt; poached eggs with frisee; or fish and chips -- and "garnish" each bite with the smoke from each sip of beer.