



Oerbier

October 2011

De Dolle Brouwers, Esen, West Flanders, Belgium

9.0% ABV \$/330 mL

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West Flanders is the northwesternmost region in Belgium. It is a very flat part of a very flat country, and gray afternoons instill a hush over the farm fields, monasteries, and World War I battlefields. The sun sets over sandy beaches along the North Sea. The Flemings who live here have an indomitable spirit, and flavorful beers and an unlikely sense of humor are found in abundance. Historically, West Flanders' expressive beer and humble produce -- beets, carrots, Brussels sprouts -- nourished the textile workers in cities like Bruges. In the second half of the 20th century, with the textile industry moved overseas, agriculture in decline, and dominance of industrial lager breweries, some of West Flanders' breweries were closing.

It was in 1980 that the brothers Herteleer, Kris and Jo, rehabilitated the former century-old Costenoble brewery in the small West Flanders town of Esen. As a homebrewer in the late 1970s, Kris had won awards at beer competitions against professional brewers. Despite Kris's brewing ability, friends and neighbors told the brothers that they were crazy to open a brewery in such an old building in such a small town during a time when small breweries were closing, not opening. The brothers, in true Flemish character, opened the brewery, devised unique beers with jokey names and silly, cartoon visuals, and named the company De Dolle Brouwers -- Flemish for "The Mad Brewers." Their beers are incredibly expressive and complex, pushing the envelope and furthering the unique identity of beer from West Flanders, which already had included such specialties as sour, solventy Flanders red ales, hoppy, steely ales from Belgian hop country, and powerful, fruity abbey ales.

After three decades of enjoying De Dolle's beers, brewers and beer connoisseurs held a collective breath in March of 2010 when a fire ravaged part of the brewery. Thankfully, there were no serious injuries, though some of the historical equipment and the building were damaged. Production slowed temporarily, but all is back online now and the Herteleers -- Kris, Jo, and their spitfire mother who works as the brewery's tour guide -- continue to produce fantastic, fun, bottle-conditioned West Flanders beer.

Oerbier is one of the brewery's flagship beers (along with Arabier; blond, dry, hoppy, something of a cross between a triple and a saison), and is a bit softer than other De Dolle beers. The brewery produces many beers that are highly alcoholic and highly bitter, which is perhaps a nod to Esen's proximity to Poperinge, Belgium's hop country (though most of De Dolle's beers are bittered with German hops and sometimes finished with English hops for aroma). Oerbier keeps its bitterness low and instead focuses on an endlessly interesting interplay between caramelized malt, sugars, and fermentation flavors. The beer's dark color suggests toffee, brandy, and red wine, and these flavors all come through on the palate. The beer's body is extremely light for the amount of alcohol in it, a feat achieved by the addition of dark Belgian candi sugar, a very fermentable caramelized syrup. (The more fermentable a sugar is, the less body, sweetness, and flavor it will leave behind once fermented.) Fermenting non-malt sugars, as well as fermenting at high temperatures, can add cidery, winy, and solventy flavors to a beverage, and Oerbier plays this vinous, alcoholic flavor profile off pleasant yeast flavors of clove and bread. The beer is bottle conditioned, which allows for a tight, almost mousse-y carbonation and mouthfeel and extra bready, savory flavors.

Oerbier pours a dark, ruby-tinged brown and is quickly capped by a lively, frothy cream-colored head. The bouquet leaps from the glass and is endlessly complex, at once inviting and impenetrable, fruity and solventy, spicy and earthy, alcoholic and sweet. Tasting it reveals notes of berries, cherries, currants, tartness, toffee, wood, and leather, all of which dance on fine, spritzzy carbonation. It's a beer that's both elegant and powerful, and it finishes with a warming, alcoholic kick. This beer likes rich, gamy foods, like crisped duck confit with dried cherries, or cream of mushroom soup with truffle salt, but it's downright infatuated with cheese. It has the lightness of body to cut through cheese of any richness and texture, and has earthy qualities that marry with the funk of washed-rind Red Hawk or Harbison, savory and nutty qualities that echo those of



Parmigiano or Emmentaler, fruity sweetness to counter the acidity of goat cheeses, and a dusty, woody finish that works wonders with blue Stilton and Roquefort. Oerbier's first and last commands are "Get thee to a cheesery."

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TREAT

Midnight Sun Brewing Company, Anchorage, Alaska, United States

7.8% ABV \$/22 oz

At the Great American Beer Festival in 2007, Midnight Sun's pumpkin-y, chocolate-y beer won a gold medal in the "Experimental Beer" style category, beating out 33 other beers in the category. At that time, the beer was called Imperial Chocolate Pumpkin Porter. It's since been renamed The Royal Eccentric Ale Treatment, which conveniently shortens to TREAT, as in "Trick or" Its gold medal in the Experimental category is testament to both the quality of the beer and its un-categorizable, experimental attitude. Midnight Sun Brewing Company has been brewing boldly flavored, big beers since it opened in 1995. These beers are an extension of the brewery's frontier mentality -- brewing edgy beers on the edge of the continent. The brewers joke on TREAT's label, asking if the beer is "Demented or delicious?" The answer may just come back "Both."

The beer is enjoyable, sweet, smooth, spiced, boozy, and timely for chilly autumn nights and the American set of Halloween-to-Thanksgiving flavors -- freshly harvested pumpkins and squash, and the cinnamon, clove, and chocolate they take on so well. However, to dismiss TREAT as just a cutesy seasonal beer would be doing it injustice. The beer is really masterfully balanced. The roasty malt flavors and malty sweetness parry each other. The subtly earthy, vegetal pumpkin provides counterpoint to the high notes of the baking spices. Warming alcohol thins the beer's full mouthfeel. The spices -- barks and seeds, essentially -- lend the smooth beer some important tannic structure. And where would the pumpkin, cocoa nibs, cloves, and cinnamon be without the malty sweetness to temper their savory and dry, spicy flavors (when was the last time you ate raw baker's chocolate or cinnamon toast without any sugar)? This beer can be a dime novel or a dissertation -- underneath the easy-drinking exterior that giggles about pumpkin pie and mexican chocolate ice cream is a beverage as deep, nuanced, and nerdy as you want it to be. It's sort of a treat with tricks up its sleeve.

As the label on the bottle says, pour your TREAT into a snifter or a glass with a inwardly-tapered opening -- this is a nose you don't want to let dissipate anywhere. The beer's color, just on the chocolate-chip side of black, is a great teaser: it lets you know the beer's going to be chocolatey and roasty, but the spoiler alert is saved for the nose. It's a whiff packed with spice, pie, and s'mores, with a vegetal whisper of pumpkin to ground it all. The taste delivers on the aroma's promises, and chocolate, baking spices, wintergreen, and silky sweetness enrobe the palate. The gentle carbonation is just enough to prolong the flavors, and the beer gains texture from the spices' tannins and some cinnamon-y, boozy heat. Hints of vanilla, cinnamon, and warming alcohol are all reminiscent of bourbon; this beer would be great aged in a whiskey barrel. In fact, Midnight Sun has released an oak-aged version of TREAT (but you have to go to Alaska to get any of it).

TREAT is phenomenal with chocolate and desserts. Pumpkin pie, Twix, Reese's, vanilla ice cream with a caramel or a rum-butter sauce; all of it is going to be a match made in heaven. Or maybe in Hell, since it is Halloween time. To relieve TREAT of dessert duty, though, try it with a grilled hamburger with whiskey-glazed onions, black pepper bacon, and barbecue sauce, or pair it with some Thai pumpkin curry with coconut rice. (Midnight Sun also has a great recommendation for cooking with TREAT: slow-roast some lamb shanks that have bathed in a TREAT and Moroccan spice marinade.)

Cheers to a beery Halloween!