



**September 2012**

It's Oktoberfest time, so this month we're featuring two German regional specialties -- a sour beer and a smoke beer that make an effort to be refined and drinkable. Bottoms up!

*Prost!*

*Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone*

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**1809**

**Dr. Fritz Briem, Munich, Bavaria, Germany**

**5.0% ABV \$/500 mL**

In the last two centuries, modern brewing techniques have bred sourness out of most beers; for centuries prior, a degree of sourness was quite common among many beers because of infiltration by airborne yeasts and bacteria. Today, we enjoy that sour legacy in only a handful of traditional styles. One of these styles is Berliner weisse (pronounced *VICE-uh*), which is soured in a relatively "simple" way. Rather than being fermented by the dozen or so bacteria and yeast strains that create the earthy, funky, vinegary flavors of Belgian sours, Berliner weisse is soured by only one bacterium, producing lactic acid and drying the beer out (not leaving residual sugar). So, for people who have not warmed to the intense barnyardy and solventy sourness of some Belgian beers, they frequently enjoy the bright, yogurty tang of a Berliner weisse.

In a country known for its lagers, the most famous ale is weissbier, which is not to be confused with the weisses of Berlin. *Weiss* (pronounced *vice*) is German for "white," and refers to the cloudy, yeasty appearance of unfiltered beers. Weissbier (more commonly called hefeweizen in Bavaria) is beer brewed from wheat and barley malts with yeast-derived flavors of banana and clove. So, while hefeweizens and weissbiers are the same thing, and while Berliner weisses are unfiltered wheat beers, Berliner weisses are definitely not in the same category.

In a Berliner weisse fermentation, lactic acid bacteria compete with ale yeast to consume malt sugars. Fermentation by lactic acid bacteria is very common: they are principal players in fermenting milk into yogurt, cabbage into sauerkraut or kimchi, dough into sourdough, and cucumbers into kosher dills. They also happen to be appreciated, somewhat idiosyncratically, for turning the beers of Berlin puckeringly sour -- so sour, in fact, that Berliners make them more palatable by adding a shot of sweet raspberry or herbal anise syrup to the glass. Berliner weisse's bright, tart flavors, along with a slight yeasty nuttiness and spritzy carbonation, have earned it the moniker the "Champagne of the North." Like Champagne, Berliner weisse is name-controlled, and a beer of that name can only legally be brewed in Berlin. Despite a storied history highlighted (or lowlighted, depending your allegiances) in 1809 by Napoleon basking in victory over the Prussians by serving celebratory Berliner weisses to his troops, the beer's popularity fell sharply in the last century. Today, only two Berlin breweries brew the beer.

The beer's scarcity is a shame to Dr. Fritz Briem, a German beer revivalist and Technology Director of the Doemens brewing institute in Munich. He has researched the history and science behind the style, creating a recipe brewed under his name by Staatsbrauerei Weihenstephan. (He also lends his name and formulation to an unhopped grut beer and a sour, smoked grätzer.) Since the beer is not brewed in Berlin, the label mentions that it is "brewed in the traditional style of the Berliner Weisse." Briem contends that it is more authentic than the two weisses brewed in Berlin these days, which are blends of sour and non-sour beers after fermentation is completed. 1809's brewing process involves traditional but now-uncommon steps, and they help create an authentic Berliner-style weisse with light color, pronounced lactic sourness, and no residual sugar; one that drinks lightly and elegantly despite its full-bodied malt proteins. Briem's goal was to balance 1809's tartness with silky malts, making a drinking-ready weisse with no need for fruit syrups.

In the glass, 1809 is a lovely golden straw color, full of vivacious bubbles and capped with a white head. The nose is bready, yeasty, yogurty, and slightly smoky, with a gentle sting of carbon dioxide. A sip greets you with the pronounced lactic sourness of yogurt or sauerkraut, but it's almost immediately tempered with a fluffy, soft bready character from the malt. Hints of cucumber, lemon, woody lemon seed, and black pepper also swirl among the malt, tartness, and cottony carbonation. Bitterness isn't really an issue, here, with just a modicum of German hops



added for balance and herby intrigue. There is no residual sugar, as the lactic acid bacteria has consumed any malt sugars the less efficient yeast might have left behind. Overall, it's a light, fruity beer with a spring in its step. 1809 will forever be a friend of pretzels, cheese, mustard, pork, and cabbage -- but it's fun to introduce it to some outsiders. It's great with Southeast Asian food, nimbly cutting through ghee or coconut milk, finding a funky partner in fish sauce, and lifting the food's minty, gingery, and vegetal notes to new heights. You can also treat it like a champagne cocktail and plop a couple raspberries or grapes right into the glass.

### **Lagerbier Rauchbier**

**Brauerei Spezial, Bamberg, Bavaria, Germany**

**4.6% ABV \$/500 ml**

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Bamberg, a great brewing city in northern Bavaria. It's home to rauchbier (pronounced *ROWKH-beer*), beer made with barley malt that's been smoked over beechwood fires. To dry malt before brewing with it requires heat, and for centuries, that process involved setting the wet malt above a fire, and in the process the fire would roast, color, and impart smoke flavor to the malt. It has only been since the Industrial Revolution that lighter- and lighter-colored malts became available to brewers, when the first coke-fired kilns and drum roasters were used that could provide even, indirect heat to dry the malt at relatively cool temperatures and without smoking it.

If you're a San Franciscan familiar with rauchbier, it's probably the intensely smoky, bacon-like Schlenkerla Märzen or Urbock you've tasted. Across the River Regnitz from where Schlenkerla is brewed stands the much smaller Brauerei Spezial, a two-room, dark oak bräustube restaurant with the brewery behind the kitchen. Spezial caters primarily to locals, and favors a more restrained smoke profile in its rauchbiers (some find Schlenkerla's beers to be almost vulgarly smoky). Spezial's Lagerbier is smoky, for sure (their house-smoked malt makes up 40% of the beer's malt bill), but the smokiness is integrated into the beer and is not distracting. It's a bit like the hops in a pale ale versus an IPA; in one they provide balance, in the other they steal the show. Keep in mind that rauchbier is not one type of beer. Adding *rauchmalz* (smoked malts) to a märzen, bock, or any other beer creates a rauchmärzenbier, a rauchbockbier, and so on. The Spezial rauchbier we're featuring is Spezial's flagship Lagerbier. It's a little too dark to be a helles or an export, a little too light in body to be a märzen, not bitter enough to be a pilsner, etc. -- all sub-types of lager -- so the brewery just calls it a "lager."

This beer is imported from Germany by Shelton Brothers, an importer committed to finding interesting beers from small breweries all over the world. Because their beers are often "niche" beers, they're not always the fastest sellers. You'll notice 18.09.12 is stamped on the front label near "Mindestens haltbar bis:." Yup, the beer is a little out of date. But the flavor isn't diminished, and it's still a delicious beer that shows off the pride of Bamberg. However, you may see some cloudy floaters in the beer. These are malt and hop proteins that can end up coagulating in a beer based on temperature and length of storage. Not ideal, and a proud German lager brewer would probably be appalled. However, the proteins -- called chill haze -- are nothing to worry about. They're utterly tasteless, odorless, and too small and fragile to feel. However, they do muck up the beer's appearance a bit. Just think how nice it is to be drinking a beer from a small, artisan brewery that doesn't "chillproof" the beer by filtering out all the flavor along with those proteins!

Spezial Lagerbier pours a burnt orange color in the glass underneath an off-white billow of foam. Trapped in that foam, and emanating from the ochre beer waiting below, is a nose of smoke, honey, and toasty malt. Taking a sip reveals a world of complexity, none of which is the fruit or spice flavors of an ale. A clean, savory smokiness intermingles with toasty bread and toffee flavors from the malt, a hint of saltiness from the brewing water, and mild, herbal bitterness from German hops. As should be expected from a low-alcohol beer, the mouthfeel is fairly thin, but it has an appealing, thinned-honey viscosity from the malt's subtle caramels. The beer finishes smartly and tightly on the palate from the smoke's phenolics, and as smoke tends to, it lingers in the nose. It loves foods that love smoke, so for pairings think of it almost as a smoky sauce or garnish. Try it with a carnitas burrito, chips and seven-layer dip, a hamburger or veggie burger slathered with caramelized onions, or a salad with Humboldt Fog cheese crumbled on top.