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This month, we take a taste of two Belgian abbey-style beers: Rochefort 10 is brewed by robed monks at a centuries-old abbey in the forested hills of the Belgian Ardennes; Alesmith Grand Cru flows from fermenters in a Southern California industrial park. Ignore the disparity in provenance, though, because these beers are both the real deal, epitomizing the rich, fruity, spicy ales that helped make Belgian beer famous.

In the US, we like to pigeon-hole beers into styles, but in Belgium that's not the case, and their beers are brewed to express uniqueness, character, and artistry. Much has been made of abbey-style beers, and though they seem cowed in history like a monk in his robe, the beers we recognize today as "abbey style" in fact only coalesced around some common traits within the past hundred years. Many of the beers are given the numeric names which refer to increases in strength of palate and alcohol -- tawny abbey doubles run about 8% abv, golden triples run 9-10% abv, and rich quadruples run 10-12% abv. Many of the breweries also brew a daily victual beer, often dubbed *single* or *enker*, and serve it only within the abbey walls. Singles are low in alcohol and reserved in palate -- as food for the monks, they're not to lead into temptation. The abbeys sell their doubles, triples, and other special beers to the public, raising funds to sustain the abbey and for charitable giving.

The seven Trappist abbey breweries (six in Belgium, one in the Netherlands) don't even all brew similar beers -- they're known for their malty doubles and triples, but there are a handful of hoppy blond ales, amber ales, and even a Brettanomyces-tinged beer among the offerings. The style we're tasting this month is Belgian abbeys' most special offering: the *réserve*, the *spéciale*, the *grand cru*. It's really the secular breweries, both in Belgium and more recently in the US, that have helped to codify the styles, brewing scores of delicious doubles, triples, and quadruples that borrow from the Trappists and the secular competition. This is why it's fun to taste and compare a Trappist beer (beer brewed by an actual Trappist abbey) with a secular abbey-style beer -- both are cut from the same cloth, but they may differ in subtle and delicious ways.

So what is it about these beers that makes them a style? Essentially, there are two primary styles that most of the Trappist breweries brew, and that secular brewers borrow from when brewing an abbey beer. The abbey double (*dubbel* in Flemish, *double* in French) and abbey triple (*tripel* in Flemish, *triple* in French) are brown and golden ales, respectively, that are malty, low in bitterness, high in alcohol, and richly fruity and spicy with fermentation flavors. The abbey ale yeast produces many flavorful byproducts, including certain esters that are the same as those found in fruits, certain phenols that are the same as those found in spices, and various alcohols, called fusels, that can taste like flowers and solvents. This fruit and spice basket of flavors is built on a sturdy malt backbone, but one that is lighter than one might expect from alcohol levels of 8-12%. The beers are chaptalized -- more frequently in Belgium, less frequently in the US -- meaning that cane or beet sugars are added to fuel the fermentation, and these contribute little to the body or richness of the beer.

Low bitterness levels, high carbonation, and a nimble mouthfeel all allow the abbey ale yeast's fruity esters, spicy phenols, and aromatic alcohols sing in a lusty, evocative timbre. It's like sipping a beer downwind from a pie bakery -- breadly, fruity, juicy, spiced, warming, and candyish (with an extra hint of medicinal cough drops). There's something seductive about these big beers -- no doubt a reason their brotherly brewers abstain from drinking them -- and among the abbey yeast's forbidden fruit are flavors of bananas and figs, as well as dried fruit and stone fruit: golden raisins and apricots in golden triples; and raisins, plums, and prunes in the darker doubles and quads.

Abbey-style beers are bottle conditioned, which allows a fermentation in the bottle to carbonate the beer and lock in the beautiful flavors and carbonation of a final fermentation. Bottle conditioning requires aging the bottled beer for a couple weeks, and during this final fermentation, a small amount of heat is produced by the yeast. At Rochefort, for decades the bottle conditioning cellar was directly underneath the chapel, and the slowly conditioning beers helped warm the feet of worshippers on the stone floor above.



These beers toe the line between sweet and savory, pairing equally well with desserts and rich, savory courses. Try them with a juicy burger dripping with melted brie, braised beef short ribs falling off the bone, or whole wheat pappardelle with porcini, sage, and hazelnuts. For dessert partners, goodies like sticky toffee pudding, Mexican chocolate ice cream, or pecan pie will all be heavenly, as would some Roquefort with a wedge of poached quince or pear.

Rochefort 10 and Alesmith Grand Cru are *bières spéciales* -- a brewer's finest offering. They're more powerful than doubles or triples, and while it can be argued that Rochefort 10 is a quad, Grand Cru is too caramelly for that style, and fitting either into a style misses the point of these unique beers. These beers are explorations of flavor, timeless tales of alchemy, and collaborations with precious yeast that allows its miracles to be bottled. Drink them in monkish contemplation on a cold winter's night or in celebration with friends at a holiday meal.

Cheers!

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

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Grand Cru

Alesmith Brewing Company, San Diego, California, USA

10.5% ABV \$/750 mL

In wine, Grand Cru is the most celebrated status of vineyard. The grapes of a grand cru vineyard consistently produce the world's best wines. In beer, Grand Cru has no official meaning, and merely connotes quality and creativity. Alesmith's Grand Cru can definitely claim quality, having been awarded a bronze medal at this year's Great American Beer Festival in the Belgian-style strong specialty ale category.

Grand Cru's perfumey, spicy alcohol nose and rich, warming alcoholic presence in the throat is the marker of fusel alcohols. Fusels, sometimes called higher alcohols, are generally not enjoyable in most beer styles, but they're quite pleasant in rich, sweeter abbey-style beers. Fusels also accentuate the perception of the banana-y ester isoamyl acetate, which Grand Cru has in spades. These heightened banana flavors are delicious with Grand Cru's raisiny, brown sugar, and rummy flavors. It shows the San Diego imprimatur of hops -- it's not a hop bomb, but has more bitterness than most abbey beers, which tempers the maltiness and residual sugar to create a balanced beer (proving that even monster, 10.5% abv beers can be balanced).

Grand Cru pours a tawny, toffee color in the glass, with a frothy head that quickly subsides. This beer boasts huge aroma and flavor, and doesn't feel the need to trap it under a thick cap of foam. Aromas of ripe banana, toffee, and Christmas cookies jump from the glass. Sipping it brings another big hit of fruit and spice: banana, ripe apple, and golden raisin mixed with brown sugar, coffee cake, and cola flavors, as well as black peppery, warming alcohols. Its finish is long and luxurious.

Rochefort 10

Trappistes Rochefort, Rochefort, Ardennes, Belgium

11.3% ABV \$/330 mL

Less banana-y and fusel-y than Alesmith Grand Cru, Rochefort 10 is no less fruity and rich. It is brewed with dark candi sugar in the mash, giving it hints of dark chocolate and roasted mushrooms and making it a darker beer than the Grand Cru. Its mousse-like carbonation adds a layer of delicateness to this giant beer. It also shows Rochefort's yeast's famous fig- and raisin-like esters. (Stan Hieronymus writes in *Brew Like A Monk* that when Rochefort's lay brewing engineer notices banana-y esters like those found in Chimay, he knows his yeast isn't at optimal healthy.)

Rochefort 10 fills your chalice -- and you should be using a chalice, snifter, or red wine glass -- with deep mahogany and a fleeting head that lingers around the edge of the glass like a monk's tonsure. The viscosity in the glass is not extreme, as one might expect in a beer of this alcohol level -- proof that it has been chaptalized. Your nose is greeted with warm notes of nuts, spice, and cola. The beer's flavor is redolent of dates, candied figs, toffee, roasted hazelnuts, and madeira-soaked prunes, with a hint of leathery, mushroomy farmhouse cheese lurking in the background. The beer is sweet, but not cloying, and its deft dash of bitter hops, fluffy carbonation, and warming alcohol keep some of the sweetness at bay.