



April 2013

Warm spring weather is approaching, which puts many people in the mood to drink hefeweizen. This month's beers, Hopf Dunkle Weiße and Gordon Biersch Weizen Eisbock, demonstrate that this Bavarian style of wheat beer is more than just a hazy, golden beer. (Full disclosure, I was a brewer at a Gordon Biersch brewpub for five years. The Weizen Eisbock is a new recipe that I never brewed, though I wish I had.)

Drink these beers as the Bavarians do: Start with a tall rounded glass large enough to accommodate a foamy, aromatic head. Make sure the glass is totally clean, as any oils or detergent will collapse the beer's head. Pour vigorously from the bottle, stopping midway through to swirl the bottle to rouse all the yeast -- this is yeast you want to drink. Finally, resist the temptation to garnish it. A lemon wedge masks the beer's tropical aroma while its citrus oils deflate the beer's head.

Prost!

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

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In a land of lagers, weissbiers seem like an anomaly. That taciturn Germans are known for wheat beers -- heady with spicy, tropical aromas of banana and cloves, with hints of bubble gum, vanilla, smoke, and wax -- seems crazy. But a peek behind Germany's stern stereotype shows how this idiosyncratic beer has been an important political and economic pawn and part of cultural memory. Despite the global dominance of lagers, all beers were ales until the last 400-500 years. Ale yeast is more expressive than lager yeast, and in the case of German wheat beers, it's the Bavarian weissbier strain of ale yeast that produces the style's hallmark aromas of clove and banana. (Weissbier translates to "white beer" in German, a comment on its cloudy appearance from wheat proteins and unfiltered yeast; Bavarians often call it hefeweizen, or "yeasty wheat.")

Two Bavarian laws unwittingly spurred the dominance of lagers in Germany. In 1516, the purity law now known as the *Reinheitsgebot* forbade, among other things, the use of wheat in beer (the Duke deemed wheat's priority to be in the bakery, not the brewery). Then in 1553 came a prohibition on brewing in the summertime, when beers could spoil easily. Until 1850, Bavarian brewers could only brew in the winter, a practice that all but retired warm-fermenting weissbier yeast while hybridizing a neutral, cold-loving yeast -- now known as lager yeast -- to do the job.

However, wheat beer did not meet its demise in 1516; rather, above-the-law rights to brew it were to see centuries of trading. A family of Bavarian feudal lords negotiated exclusive permission to brew it until 1602, when a death without an heir transferred the monopoly back to the Bavarian dukes. The dukes then saw to it that their court-brewed weissbier was sold to every tavern in the land. After a golden age of weissbier in the 1600s, its profitability had waned sufficiently by the late 1700s that the Bavarian State sold weissbier brewing rights to several public and monastery breweries. These breweries in turn found little success with wheat beer, and in 1872 the State sold the rights for a final time to plucky weissbier revivalist Georg Schneider, of subsequent Schneider Weisse fame. Since the 1960s, when Schneider's was one of the last wheat beers available in Germany, this fusty remnant of a fruitier ale past has, thank goodness, survived and thrived. Today it controls 10% of Germany's domestic beer market and a robust 30% of the Bavarian beer market. Fortunate beer drinkers from Munich to San Francisco can hoist a glass of this phoenix, drinking a cultural icon that is as exotic-tasting as it is quaffable and quotidian.

Over the centuries, weissbier has developed several variations. The toasty, caramelly dunkelweisse (literally "dark white") offers more malty complexity than standard weissbiers. And for those who benefit from the stoutness of full-bodied beer and the vigor of high-alcohol, weizenbock can be a wolf in sheep's clothing, hiding 7-8% ABV beneath a fruity, malty facade. The winter practice of exposing beer to the elements -- either intentionally or fortuitously -- beckons the opportunity to remove some less-than-necessary ice, resulting in a primitive (and more-importantly *Reinheitsgebot*-approved) method of distillation and elevation of alcohol content. This process as applied to a weizenbock yields a weizeneisbock, the beauty of Bavarian malts and wheat beer yeast in their most concentrated essence.



Dunkle Weisse

Hopf Weißbierbrauerei, Miesbach, Bavaria, Germany

5.0% ABV \$/500 ml

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Hopf has been brewing weissbier in the foothills of the Alps since 1921, and is currently helmed by Brewmaster Robert Weizenbauer (he smirks when he tells you it's just a coincidence that his name means "wheat farmer"). The operation is beautiful, with a shiny copper brewhouse and several stainless steel open fermenters. To harvest and reuse the precious yeast, Weizenbauer rolls an empty tub next to an active fermentation, eyeballing its placement below a chute at the top of the fermenter. During the height of fermentation ("high kräusen"), when the yeast multiplies and froths up in volume, the healthiest yeast overflows out of the chute and into the waiting yeast tub below. The yeast is kept refrigerated until needed to ferment the next batch of wort. Almost every brewery harvests and reuses its yeast (Hopf does so 60-80 times before growing a new batch of yeast), but it is a beautiful sight to see fluffy billows of yeast tumbling silently from a vat and knowing that what lurks beneath is delicious weissbier.

Hopf's Dunkle Weiße pours a Tootsie-Roll mahogany in the glass. A billowy, lasting head the color of cappuccino froth tops the beer, inflating with aromas of toasted banana bread, clove, and cola. The flavor swims with spices like clove, nutmeg, and pepper, while the toasted malts emphasize the yeast's hint of smokiness. The prominent banana flavor marries with the wheat's acidity to create tart green banana flavor. The beer's fruitiness is balanced by just a hint of hop bitterness and by a mineral sourness from the carbonation. Overall, the beer is pretty light on the palate and not nearly as sweet as the heady aromas suggest, making for a quaffable beer that loves smoky, salty, grilled foods. Stick to German staples like smoked pork, grilled onions, and mustard, or go for less traditional but delicious pairings like chorizo tacos, Ethiopian vegetable wat with injera, Malaysian beef rendang.

Weizen Eisbock

Gordon Biersch Brewing Company, San Jose, California, USA

10.0% ABV \$/750 ml

Gordon Biersch Brewing Company has been brewing faithful German-style beers since Dan Gordon and Dean Biersch opened their first brewpub in Palo Alto in 1988. Dan had just attended the lauded brewing program at Weihenstephan (a 5-year program, and he was the first American ever to graduate on-schedule). To the growing West Coast craft beer scene he brought a passion for brewing authentic German-style beers. As the brewpub chain expanded, tied house regulations caused the company to split, but Dan still spearheads the production brewing facility in San Jose, now a separate company from the brewpubs. Last October, he won a bronze medal at the Great American Beer Festival for Weizen Eisbock (German-Style Wheat Ale Category). Most German-style beers, with their low alcohol and delicate nuance, just don't travel very well, and so it's nice to have some fresh ones being brewed nearby in San Jose. Weizen Eisbock, of course, is a good bit brawnier than most German-style beers. Though it has enough alcohol to age gracefully, I'd enjoy it now. Each day it ages, the yeast aromatics diminish a bit behind an evolving (though delicious) interplay of malt, sugars, and alcohols.

In the glass, Weizen Eisbock boasts a tawny mahogany color, a majestic viscosity, and a thick, tan head. The nose is ripe banana, toffee, clove, orange zest, and liqueur, while on the palate it blossoms into a bawdy beer with the buxom body of a barleywine, the spritzy acidity and prickly carbonation of a weissbier, and the hedonistic sweetness of roasted bananas flambéed with brandy. The beer is incredibly flavorful and evocative, at once sweet and savory, and each time it hints at a dessert flavor (is that sticky toffee pudding? maple-candied pecans?) it counters with suggestion of savoriness (porcini with rosemary-Madeira sauce?). On the aftertaste, the hops' herbal bitterness lingers as a digestif, beckoning to be savored at the end of a meal. I recommend opening a bottle during a main course of wild boar sausage or venison with Balsamic gastrique, sipping a second glass of it with bananas Foster or waffles with bacon marmalade and Humphry Slocombe's Secret Breakfast ice cream, and then finishing it off in contemplation while someone else does the dishes.