



Tulips, Windmills and ... Craft Beer?

THE NETHERLANDS
ENTERS THE BEER SCENE

It wasn't more than 30 years ago that—so the story goes—Michael Jackson left the mass-produced lagers of the Netherlands in search of better beer in Belgium. And not long after discovering the diverse array of traditional Abbey styles brewed just across the southern Dutch border, the British journalist returned home and began writing the career-defining books that would soon introduce Belgian beers to the rest of the Western world.

Jackson's experience isn't uncommon. The Dutch beer culture has always lived in the shadow of the more flavorful Dubbels and Tripels from its famous neighbors.

"In the Netherlands, there was nothing," says Peter van der Arend, owner of Holland's first all-Dutch-beer bar, in Amsterdam. During the Middle Ages, he says, Dutch beer was able to travel a lot farther than Belgium's because of the country's sailing dominance, but even then, they were merely replicates of traditional European styles.

"After the second World War, we only had 20 breweries left, and they all brewed lagers. But Belgium kept their beer culture because of 'streekbier,' or the local beer of the region. A guy from Brussels didn't drink beer from Antwerp—so breweries were able to survive the revolution of the lagers."

Dutch brewing history, then, for the latter half of the century, paralleled America's, with a few top lager-producing companies making the lion's share of beer sold in the country. The microbreweries that did eventually exist in the Netherlands (the first opened in 1981, according to van der Arend) merely copied Belgian beers, which is understandable given the historical tendons that connect the two countries.

But over the last 10 years, there's been a dramatic surge in both small brewers and adventurous consumers in the Netherlands who are proud of their solidarity and are helping to pull Dutch beer out of Belgium's shadow. With a host of new flavors being infused into experimental riffs on current global beer styles, a distinctively Dutch brewing identity is now forming with companies such as De Molen, Emelisse, De Prael, Christoffel and Rooie Dop at the helm.



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Dutch craft beer is still a very niche market, but the increased exposure of the Dutch beer culture owes much to van der Arend, who is known by many as the ambassador of Dutch beer. In addition to his bar, Arendsnest—which opened in 2000 against the advice of every Dutch brewer he spoke with—van der Arend also conducts beer tastings, hosts beer classes and works closely with PINT (Promotion Information Traditional Beer—“traditional” here means “uniquely Dutch” rather than “old school”), a Campaign for Real Ale-like beer consumer organization that aims to increase visibility and knowledge of the emerging Netherlands beer scene.

“When I started 12 years ago, Dutch beer was very small, and everyone thought I was crazy,” says van der Arend, who wanted to promote the 50 or so small breweries that existed in the country at the time. “Before I opened, I went to all the breweries in Netherlands to talk to them about selling to me, and all of them said it wasn’t possible. A bar with only Dutch beer? No way.”

Back then, the craft breweries that did exist were too small to bottle or keg, and there wasn’t much motivation to expand since most Dutch establishments that advertised themselves as carrying specialty beer only offered beers from Belgium anyway.

Today, Arendsnest is still the only all-Dutch beer bar in the country. Its menu often features beers from the Netherlands’ single Trappist brewery—Koningshoeven—as well as newer flavor adventures, like Rooie Dop’s Chica Americana IPA (a malty take on the style, made with American hops), Emelisse’s Imperial Stout (with more roasted malts, some versions are aged in Jack Daniel’s barrels), Christoffel’s Nobel (a matured lager dry-hopped with noble hops) and special one-off brews, like an unfiltered smoked Kölsch from Amsterdam’s own De Prael, whose tasting room lays hidden down an alley in the Red Light District.

Aside from Arendsnest and a few other exceptions, most of the craft beer (or “speciaalbier”) bars

throughout the Netherlands continue to emphasize the more internationally recognized Belgian beers, but now that there are more than 120 breweries in the Netherlands, increasing the local beer options on Dutch bar menus seems to be inevitable.

“The Dutch café owners don’t have confidence in the Dutch beer right now, and that’s something that I think is going to change in the next five years,” says Tim Skelton, author of *Around Amsterdam in 80 Beers*, a guide that features 80 cafés in the Dutch city with a recommended beer to drink at each.

“Most of the beers [in the book] are Belgian, and that was out of necessity because that is mostly what is served. But we’re reprinting [the book] right now with the addition of six Dutch beers, and that’s just in the two years since the book first came out. More and more, you’re going to start seeing local beer on good Dutch café menus.”

So, where is contemporary Dutch beer culture coming from, exactly? The easiest way to understand the myriad of new flavors and styles currently coming out of the tiny country is to simply look at a map.

With a population of only 16 million people (about half the size of California’s), the Netherlands shares borders with both Belgium and Germany—home to two of the world’s four major beer traditions. It is also situated along some of Europe’s most historic oceanic trade routes, which easily connects it with Britain and America, the other two brewing powerhouses.

Also consider that to the north of the Netherlands is Scandinavia—a region that has involved itself recently in the global beer community (think Mik-keller from Denmark, and Nogne Ø and HaandBrygeriet from Norway)—and you might begin to have an idea of the multiple brewing movements coming together to create this new Dutch beer culture.

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Menno Olivier, founder and head brewer at Brouwerij De Molen, one of the few Dutch craft breweries that exports to the United States. “And I sort of combined all that together instead of trying to make copies of beers.”

De Molen began in 2004 in a centuries-old windmill in the center of a small, rural town about an hour’s drive from Amsterdam. Olivier’s love of collaboration with brewers from America and beyond (most recently, he invited Fred Karm of Ohio’s Hoppin’ Frog out for an open-door brew day), as well as his willingness to blend brewing traditions from around the world, has produced award-winning Stouts, IPAs and barrel-aged specialty beers, putting De Molen and the Netherlands on the map for global beer geeks.

It has also encouraged other Dutch brewers to do the same.

“You can always learn from looking in someone else’s kitchen, and you shouldn’t worry that someone else will steal from you,” says Olivier, who once gave the recipe for his Vuur & Vlam (“Fire & Flames”) IPA to nine different brewers around the world to see how they would turn out. “It’s better to see that there are all different kinds of tastes that can be made instead of being protective [of recipes]. You can look at other people, you try their stuff, and then you come up with your own ideas.”

As with many other countries currently trying to bring something different to their once-stagnant local beer scenes, the Netherlands is also looking toward the aggressive bitterness and decidedly un-Euro risk-taking present in American brewing.

It’s no accident that when van der Arend decided to open a second bar in Amsterdam, it was an American-style bar called Beer Temple, where kegs of Flying Dog’s Raging Bitch tap out in less than a week and months-old Pliny the Elder bottles (which were traded for bottles of Westvleteren) sell for €30.

But what’s coming out of these small Dutch breweries is by no means clones of anything brewed in America. Instead, many are American styles with

a Dutch twist, like Jacobus RPA, brewed by Jopen, which brews inside a former church sanctuary in Haarlem, about 20 kilometers west of Amsterdam. The heavily hopped Rye Pale Ale has an ostensible sweetness, and shows up on Arendsneest’s menu as a “Bitter Amber.” Then there’s De Witte Leeuw’s Amarillo Sun, which has an obvious American IPA influence in its hop profile, but reins it in to make a drinkable, flavorful, light beer.

“The way they’re doing it is more of the traditional European mindset, where the hops were there for flavor and for character, and not so much for bitterness,” explains Christian Gregory from Shelton Brothers, which began importing Amarillo Sun this year. “It is bitter, but it’s not what you would expect from a West Coast IPA or something like that. The [Dutch-brewed] American styles we get back might have influence from American beers, but it’s also a totally different take on them.”

Despite a slew of great new beers being made, and a handful of Dutch cafés and bars that are beginning to serve them, craft beer in the Netherlands is still not a lucrative business. Most of the new breweries remain too small to distribute outside of their hometowns, and until the inaugural Dutch Beer Week (“Week van het Nederlandse Bier”) this past May, there were few large-scale promotions of the country’s speciaalbier culture. Then again, maybe keeping things small will be another trait unique to the Dutch craft beer industry.

“We keep things small because it fits what we’re doing,” says De Molen’s Olivier, who recently expanded into a 25-hectoliter (about 21-barrel) system, which is as big as he says he will grow. “We don’t want be giant or to overflow the market. Real good beer should be in small portions, anyway. It doesn’t matter when it runs out—you should be able to wait for them.”

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