

# Tech Corner

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By Ken Woodson

What can we say about Belgium ales? Wow, where do you start? My first encounter with big Belgium ales was at a Dallas Restaurant near Fair Park back in 2002. The Restaurant served a five course meal that was coordinated with the following Belgium ales: Triple Karmelite, Kwak, Chimay Red, Chimay White, Chimay Blue, Urthel Amber and Urthel Triple. I was hooked on Belgium ale from that moment on. After the dinner, I was surprised to learn that the ales were very high in alcohol content. The ales were very flavorful and did not even give a hint at the high level of alcohol (for example the Chimay Blue was 9% abv), very dangerous indeed. I was surprised again when I learned that Belgium monks brew some of the best beers in the world.

So how does a monk who devotes his entire life to prayer end up brewing beer? To answer this question we have to go back to 530 A.D. when Saint Benedict wrote the rules for monastic life. According to Saint Benedict, a monk should spend a portion of his day praying and a portion working. Through their labor, the monks should be self-sufficient to avoid going to the outside world and encounter temptation. At that time, water was not safe to drink and monks typically were vegetarians, so beer was a natural solution. Given the self-sufficiency requirement, it was also natural that the monks began brewing their own beer.

The history of Belgium monastic brewing is very interesting. In 1098 Saint Bernard and others introduced a stricter version of Saint Benedict's rules which lead to the formation of the Order of Cistercians. And in 1656, another reform took place at the Cistercian monastery of La Trappe. Abbot Armand-Jean de Rancé led the reform for a purer form of observance of Saint Benedict's rules that lead to the establishment of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance or Trappist monks.

In 1796, during the French Revolution, all religious monasteries in Belgium were sold or destroyed. Consequently, the monastic way of life disappeared for 40 years.

Belgium declared independence from the Netherlands in 1830. Around this same time period, several abbeys were re-established, albeit on a smaller scale. Also, some Trappist abbeys were founded. For example, Chimay was established in 1850 and began brewing in 1862. Trappist monks from Westmalle established Achel in 1844 and malting and brewing started there in 1852. In 1887, monks from Achel re-established the abbey at Rochefort. The Germans ransacked Belgium monasteries during World War I and WWII interrupted brewing at the monasteries in Belgium; however, post WWII many monasteries resumed brewing and became the serious brewing operation we know today.

In 1962 a trade court in Ghent ruled that only Trappist monasteries could use the appellation Trappistenbier. Today, there are only seven Trappist monasteries that legally have a right to brew beer labeled as Trappist beer. The monasteries and their beers are listed below:

- Achel, produces Blond 5, Bruin 5, Blond 8 (Tripel), Bruin 8, and Bruin Extra
- Chimay, produces Chimay Red (Dubbel), White (Tripel), Blue (Belgium Dark Strong Ale), Dorée (Lower gravity beer for the monks)
- Orval, produces Orval (Belgium Specialty Ale), and Petit (Lower gravity beer for the monks)

- Rochefort, produces Rochefort 6, Rochefort 8 (Belgium Dark Strong Ale), and Rochefort 10 (Belgium Dark Strong Ale)
- Westmalle, produces Dubbel, Tripel, and Extra (Lower gravity beer for the monks)
- Westvleteren, produces Blond, Westvleteren 8, and Westvleteren 12 (Belgium Dark Strong Ale)
- Schaapskooi, produces Blond, Dubbel, Tripel, and Quadrupel under the name La Trappe.

All are in Belgium except for Schaapskooi which is in the Netherlands.

In next month's article we will explore how the Trappist monks brew their beer.

If you would like to read more about Belgium Ales or Trappist breweries here are two good resources:

*Classic Beer Style Series 6, Belgium Ale*, by Pierre Rajotte

and

*Brew Like a Monk*, by Stan Hieronymus