

Beer (<http://draftmag.com/category/beer/>)

f (<http://facebook.com/draftmagazine>)

Food (<http://draftmag.com/category/food/>)

Travel (<http://draftmag.com/category/travel/>)

Magazine (<http://draftmag.com>)



REVIEWS ([HTTP://DRAFTMAG.COM/REVIEWS](http://draftmag.com/reviews)) ▾ BEER GUIDE ([HTTP://DRAFTMAG.COM/CATEGORY/BEERGUIDE/](http://draftmag.com/category/beerguide/))

CONTESTS ([HTTP://DRAFTMAG.COM/CONTESTS](http://draftmag.com/contests)) ▾ BEERTOWNS ([HTTP://DRAFTMAG.COM/CATEGORY/BEERTOV](http://draftmag.com/category/beertown/))

[Home \(http://draftmag.com/\)](http://draftmag.com/) > [Beer \(http://draftmag.com/category/beer/\)](http://draftmag.com/category/beer/) > Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers

Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers

[BEER \(HTTP://DRAFTMAG.COM/CATEGORY/BEER/\)](http://draftmag.com/category/beer/) [FEATURE \(HTTP://DRAFTMAG.COM/CATEGORY/FEATURE/\)](http://draftmag.com/category/feature/)

SHARE **f** ([http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/&t=Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers](http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/&t=Everything's+relative:+the+Belgian+Family+Brewers)) **t** ([https://twitter.com/home?status=Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers+http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/](https://twitter.com/home?status=Everything's+relative:+the+Belgian+Family+Brewers+http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/)) **g+** (<https://plus.google.com/share?url=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/>) **p** ([http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button?url=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/&media=http://draftmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family-Brewers-01.png&description=Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers](http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button?url=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%99s-relative-the-belgian-family-brewers/&media=http://draftmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family-Brewers-01.png&description=Everything's+relative:+the+Belgian+Family+Brewers))



(<http://draftmag.com/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family->

[Brewers-01.png](#))

The Belgian Family Brewers: Who – and why – are they?

by Lew Bryson

Brouwerij Bosteels was nothing but bustle on a gray, early spring day in Buggenhout, Belgium. The family brewer founded in 1791 by Evarist Bosteels and now in its seventh generation, was back in production after a short halt the installation of a new brewhouse, part of a major expansion.

“A new boiler, new kettle,” patriarch Ivo Bosteels ticks off projects. “We are renovating the old home here in the brewery—eh, ‘renovating,’ we tear it apart!” He waves toward an area that would become a new conditioning “warmhouse,” all to meet burgeoning demand. Bosteels is 217 years old and kicking.

Belgian brewing is in a ferment. Demand for the specialty beers of small brewers like Bosteels continues to grow and the brewers experiment and innovate. But Bosteels, along with 10 other family-owned, independent Belgian brewers, have felt the need to take a stand for their heritage and authenticity by forming the Belgian Family Brewers (BFB) association. The group’s seal of authenticity, with its Belgian tricolor wave, will be plastered on b labels soon.

One Singular Sensation

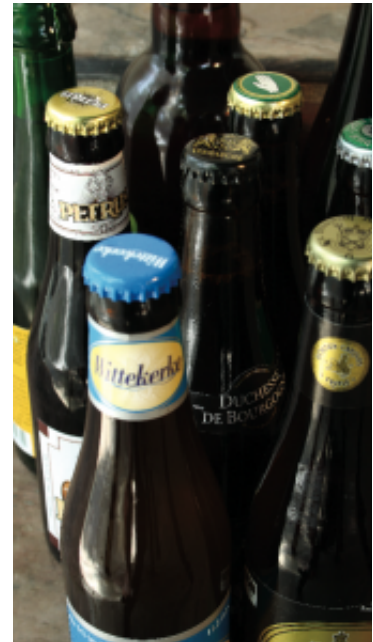
What the BFB seal means is closely defined and easy to explain. Any beer with the seal was produced in Belgium an independent, family-owned brewery that is at least 50 years old; and the beer is not sold under any other name or label. Ivo Bosteels made it clear that the last point was ironclad. "Not every beer a brewery makes is included says. "If they put the beer in another label—," he made an emphatic chopping motion with his hand. (<http://draftmag.com/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family-Brewers-03.png>)

And that, according to importer Martin Wetten (Wetten Importers brings in Het Anker and Van Honsebrouck beers), is the major origin of the association. It's not a reaction to American brewers making Belgian-style beers not even because huge and regional European brewers are buying up the smaller brewers, as Moortgat/Duvel just did by snatching up Lindemans.

"The Belgian Family Brewers are not worried about anything outside of Belgium regarding beer," Wetten says. "They're not worried about selling more beer; none of these guys can fill their orders anyway. They're more worried about their own people. It's kind of like the French and their wine. They could care less about any wine outside of France, but they've got to protect their appellation inside the country."

"They want to make sure the Belgian brewers remain of high-quality," he explains, and they're doing that by giving an example to the other brewers. "It's horrible when they do label beers, the same beer under three different labels, or a supermarket's brand. The danger is when you have too much distribution from one chain. Then if you lose that, you're dead. Even half your business is too much. That's like when Wal-Mart picks up a store brand: It becomes the lion's share of the manufacturers' output."

The association's secretary, Marc LeMay, emphasizes that "label beers" are not all bad. "They allow the breweries to make economies of scale and get a faster return on the money they have invested in equipment," he says. "Actually, it is good management. The only problem is that there is no legislation forcing the brand owner to say who the actual producer is, which means that the consumer is not properly informed and can buy the same beer three times under three different labels at three different prices. Unfortunately, a few breweries and a few distributors abuse this lack of regulation to launch increasing numbers of own-brand or private label beers."



"It's about authenticity," said Steve Villani, president of Global Beer Network (importers of Bavik, Roman and Van Eecke). "One package, one label, one beer. That's important. There's something more authentic about a brewer that isn't doing a lot of contract brews."

"Using this seal gives an obligation to the brewer to go for his original brand," says Het Anker owner Charles Lecq and "and use other recipes for contract brewing or private labels." The seal encourages originality.

You've Gotta Fight

Maybe, says Don Feinberg, principal of longtime Belgian beer importer VanBerg & DeWulf (Feinberg imports Dupont and Dubuisson, better known in the States as Scaldis). Then again, maybe not. "Label beers are a casus b he says. "What they really want is to find a place in the market, to distinguish a difference. We're not [regional] b guys, not international lager brewers. We're little guys, we want you to value our approach." (Feinberg, like Wett and Villani, was put forward as a spokesperson by the Belgian brewers he represents, but does not necessarily speak for the association.)

Feinberg sees the members of the BFB looking for a way to make a virtue of their history and continuity. "It's something to promote and argue about," he explains. "Duvel still says they're an independent family brewer, and they're huge. Affligem is owned by Heineken, cites some crazy made-up date of origin, and takes their name from abbey that is in ruins. There's so much out there that has bigger dollars behind it that treads the same path with different words. If you asked 10 Americans who knew Duvel, they'd say, 'Oh, it's a small artisanal beer.' They don see much difference between that and Saison Dupont."

He shrugs. "Everything's relative."

"For Belgians," LeMay says, "tradition requires a long history, the passing on of knowledge from father to son, fr one generation to the next, within the family. These are the ultimate expressions of tradition. Ten years ago, we : the birth of a phenomenon involving the marketing of tradition. A lot of beers have been given a marketing makeover to give them a look, an image, and a reputation which is all about tradition. Consumers find themsele faced with beers whose tradition—which is what they are looking and paying for—is only a marketing tradition." (<http://draftmag.com/new/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family-Brewers-02.png>)

Tactics like these are one reaction to success. The U.S. import market for Belgians is booming as more people discover these richly flavored beers. For these small brewers, the impulse is to send more beers, to join in the frenzy.

"A lot of breweries are inspired to introduce as many beers as possible on the U.S. market only with one goal in mind: volume," says Van Honsebrouck brewery President Xavier Van Honsebrouck. "Quantity gets more important than quality." The BFB seal is intended to give these brewers a lift above the crowd.



Size Matters

The tough question, though, is how much of a lift beers will get from a “seal” that’s about a one-centimeter square albeit brightly colored. Getting a picture of the seal on a bottle in the Het Anker pub recently took some serious close-up work. The new labels are just starting to hit the U.S. market, and without an explanation, the average consumer won’t even notice them, let alone understand or seek them out.

“Our association does not have huge resources,” says LeMay, “so we are taking things step-by-step. For the moment our best communication media are our importers.”

Steve Villani agreed that it’s the job of importers to get the word out. “If this is something that can educate the consumer,” he says, “It’s incumbent on us, as importers, to get the word out to the consumer. Your true independent family brewers are going to have to do more of a grassroots effort; we’re not doing television ads, or key print packages.”

Darius Debski, who runs D&V International Specialty Beer (which imports St. Bernardus and Verhaege), says the labels will be here soon, and that the brewers and importers will do all they can. “Stories like this help, too,” he adds.

“In America, will people give a shit? That there’s a quarter-of-an-inch thing on the beer label?” counters Feinberg. “No, they will not. It comes down to how we promote it, and how good the beer is. Their hearts are in the right place but they need to follow through.”

Charles Leclef is quite honest about the seal. “It is up to the consumer to feel if the conditions of a beer with the seal are important or not,” he says. “The brewers who are using this have no pretension to use this as a quality label.”

It’s a label, a seal, a message that means nothing more or less than what it says: a beer from an independent, family owned, Belgian brewery at least 50 years old, that is not bottled under any other name. But that’s a solid commitment, the kind that might be worth twirling a bottle to look for. •

WHO IS THE BFB?:

Bavik

Harelbeke-Bavikhove, est. 1894: Petrus, Pilaarbijter, Wittekerke (the Bavik brand does not carry the seal)

Bosteels

Buggenhout, est. 1791: Pauwel Kwak, Tripel Karmeliet, Deus

De Koninck

Antwerp, est. 1919: De Koninck

Dubuisson

Leuze-Pipaix, est. 1769: Scaldis

Dupont

Tourpes-Leuze, est. 1844: Dupont, Moinette

Het Anker

Mechelen, est. 1872: Gouden Carolus

Roman

Mater-Oudenaarde, est. 1545: Ename, Sloeber

St. Bernardus

Watou, est. 1946: St. Bernardus, Watou, Grotten Brown

Van Eecke

Watou, est. 1862: Poperings Hommelbier, Het Kapittel, Watou's Witbier

Van Honsebrouck

Ingelmunster, est. 1900: Brigand, Kasteel, St. Louis

Verhaege

Vichte, est. 1892: Echt Kriekenbier, Duchesse de Bourgogne



(<http://www.facebook.com/sharer.php?u=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%9drelative-the-belgian-family-brewers/>&t=Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers) 

([https://twitter.com/home?status=Everything's relative: the Belgian Family](https://twitter.com/home?status=Everything's%20relative%3A%20the%20Belgian%20Family%20Brewers)

Brewers+<http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%9drelative-the-belgian-family-brewers/>) 

(<https://plus.google.com/share?url=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%9drelative-the-belgian-family-brewers/>) 

([http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%9drelative-the-belgian-family-brewers/&media=http://draftmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family-Brewers-01.png&description=Everything's relative: the Belgian Family Brewers](http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=http://draftmag.com/everything%e2%80%9drelative-the-belgian-family-brewers/&media=http://draftmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Belgian-Family-Brewers-01.png&description=Everything's%20relative%3A%20the%20Belgian%20Family%20Brewers))



Previous Article

Bremen: Beck's and beyond
(<http://draftmag.com/bremen-becks-and-beyond/>)

Next Article

Our pick: Isabelle Proximus
(<http://draftmag.com/our-pick-isabelle-proximus/>)



RELATED ARTICLES

JUNE 1, 2012



(<http://draftmag.com/win-southern-new-hampshire-brewers-festival-tickets/>)

WIN: Southern New Hampshire Brewers Festival tickets!
(<http://draftmag.com/win-southern-new-hampshire-brewers-festival-tickets/>)

SEPTEMBER 16, 2010



(<http://draftmag.com/denver-bites/>)

Denver bites
(<http://draftmag.com/denver-bites/>)

FEBRUARY 3, 2011



(<http://draftmag.com/6-valentines-gifts-for-beer-lovers/>)

6 Valentine's gifts for beer love
(<http://draftmag.com/6-valentines-gifts-for-beer-lovers/>)

LEAVE A REPLY

Your email address will not be published.

Name (required)

Email (required)

Website

Comment

SUBMIT COMMENT

GET CONNECTED



68,578
FOLLOWERS

<http://www.twitter.com/draftmag>



83,562
FOLLOWERS

<http://www.facebook.com/draftmagazine/>

© DRAFT MAGAZINE

Contributors Guidelines

<http://draftmag.com/submissions/>

Beer Submissions <http://draftmag.com/beer-submissions/>

Contact Us <http://draftmag.com/contact/>

Advertise with Us <http://draftmag.com/advertising/>

Privacy Policy <http://draftmag.com/privacy/>

TRAVEL



<http://draftmag.com/smuggle-foreign-beer/>

<http://draftmag.com/smuggle-foreign-beer/>

How to smuggle beer back from foreign lands (<http://draftmag.com/smuggle-foreign-beer/>)

MARCH 18, 2015



<http://draftmag.com/japanese-craft-beer-history-future/>

<http://draftmag.com/japanese-craft-beer-history-future/>

The past-and future-of Japanese craft beer (<http://draftmag.com/japanese-craft-beer-history-future/>)

MARCH 12, 2015



([http://draftmag.com/war-pigs-](http://draftmag.com/war-pigs-mikkeller-three-floyds-copenhagen-opening/)

[mikkeller-three-floyds-copenhagen-opening/](http://draftmag.com/war-pigs-mikkeller-three-floyds-copenhagen-opening/))

Need-to-know details on Mikkeller/Th Floyds brewpub, WarPigs
(<http://draftmag.com/war-pigs-mikkeller-three-floyds-copenhagen-opening/>)

MARCH 10, 2015



([http://draftmag.com/belgium-artisan](http://draftmag.com/belgium-artisan-brewers-fans/)

[brewers-fans/](http://draftmag.com/belgium-artisan-brewers-fans/))

Belgium's artisan brewers are working stiff (with superfans)
(<http://draftmag.com/belgium-artisan-brewers-fans/>)

MARCH 10, 2015