



The history of monks and brewing

To many beer lovers, Christian monks are the archetypes of brewers. It's not that monks invented beer: Archeologists find it in both China and Egypt around 5000 B.C., long before any Christian monks existed. And it's not that the purpose of monks is to brew beer: Their purpose is to seek and to serve God, through a specific form of spiritual life. But if monks did not invent beer, and brewing is not their defining vocation, they did play a major role in Western brewing from at least the second half of the first millennium. Let's take a broad look at how.

First, some background. Christian monasticism has its formal roots in the fourth century, when the Roman Empire was still at its height. The Empire suffered serious decline during the fifth century, the era in which St. Benedict lived (c. 480 - March 21, 547). As the social structure of the Roman Empire crumbled, monasteries organized under the Rule of Benedict emerged as centers of agriculture, lodging, education, literature, art, etc. When Charlemagne established the Holy Roman Empire in the year 800, he relied on monasteries to help weave its social and economic infrastructure – and he promoted the Rule of Benedict as the standard for monastic organization. Against this brief sketch of history, we can begin to observe the relationship between monks and brewing.

In ancient days, within the Roman Empire as throughout the world, brewing was typically done in the home. This practice carried into monasteries, which had to provide drink and nourishment for the monks, as well as for guests, pilgrims, and the poor. As monasteries grew in importance, and as water supplies suffered contamination from sewage, the demand for monastic beer increased; and since monasteries had the resources to build breweries and the agricultural products from which to brew, monks became the large-scale brewers of the day. By the time of Charlemagne, brewing was a standard practice in monasteries. Eventually, six hundred monastery breweries operated across Europe. They would be the forerunners of commercial breweries, which began to appear in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Some highlights about monastic brewing from this period include:

- The Plan of St. Gall. This renowned architectural drawing, dating from around the year 820, is the only major architectural drawing to survive the 700-year period after the fall of the Roman Empire. It lays out a complete monastery, which of course contains brewing facilities. While the overall plan was never built, the brewery portion was put to widespread use in monasteries. It is the world's oldest existing brewery plan – and it is Benedictine.

- Production levels of monastic breweries based on the St. Gall plan would have averaged around 100 gallons per day.
- Monks are the first brewers known to use hops. The oldest testimony comes from Abbot Adalhard of Corbie, France, who in the year 822 mentioned the use of wild hops in brewing. German monks began the practice in about the year 1200, finding hops useful both as preservatives and for flavor. Prior to hops, herb mixtures called “gruit” were used for flavoring beer.
- Monks made improvements to the brewing process into the Middle Ages. They were the first to emphasize cleaning and sanitization, and the first to practice lagering.
- When commercial breweries began to operate in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, their production model was borrowed from the monasteries.
- The term “liquid bread” came from monks, as bread and beer come from similar ingredients and beer was used for sustenance during periods of strict fasting, such as Lent. The doppelbock beer style was invented by monks as a nutrient during Lent.
- The oldest continuously operating brewery in the world, established in 1040, is that of the Benedictine abbey of Weihenstephan, itself established in 725. Although the state of Bavaria dissolved the abbey in 1803, it has continued to operate the brewery to this day. The longevity of this brewery is closely rivaled by that of Weltenburg Abbey, also in Bavaria, which was established around 620 and its brewery in 1050. This abbey was also dissolved in 1803, but it was refounded in 1842 and continues to operate the brewery.

The flourishing of monasteries through the twelfth century enabled their rise as brewing centers. The thirteenth century, however, saw a decline in the monastic establishment. Urbanization began to change the feudal system into which monasteries had been integrated, weakening them economically and socially, and the establishment of mendicant orders – the Franciscans in 1209 and the Dominicans in 1213 – provided spiritual alternatives to monastic life. While monasteries began to shrink, commercial breweries developed. In the sixteenth century, Protestant movements shut down monasteries. Henry VIII suppressed all monasteries in England. The rationalism of the Enlightenment era considered monasteries to be useless, and secular governments from the French Revolution onward suppressed monasteries. By 1815, only 30 monasteries remained in Europe. The great age of monastic brewing was long gone.

But the story does not end there. Monasteries did rebound, and so did their involvement in brewing. Most notably, about a dozen Trappist monasteries operate breweries today, the oldest dating from the late sixteenth century and the others from the nineteenth or twentieth. These are renowned for their Belgian-style ales. To combat infringement on their monastic identity by commercial breweries, the monasteries established the Authentic Trappist Product label. Westvleteren 12, produced by St. Sixtus of Westvleteren in limited quantities and sold only at the abbey, is reputedly the best and most coveted beer in the world. In the minds of many today, monastic brewing is identified with these Trappist products.

Within this long heritage, where does the Benedictine Brewery at Mount Angel Abbey stand? Although the brewery was legally formed in 2013, the Abbey's practice of brewing long precedes that. The diary of the founding prior, Fr. Adelhelm Odermatt, O.S.B., contains the following entry, dated November 26, 1885:

The monastery property now consists of the dryer, the cheese house, the carpenter shop, the cider press, the grinding mill, a "Locomotivehall," a fruit house, sheep shed, horse and cow shed, hog pens, the hay and straw sheds, a residence for workers, a big wood shed, 2 smoke houses, the bakery, the blacksmith shop, beehouse and the Guest house and the brewery. The property consists of seven farms lying about the hill.

The brewery mentioned here probably produced beer for the consumption of the monks and their guests, not for commercial sale. But it is evidence that the monks of Mount Angel take the heritage of monastic brewing seriously. With the commitment to producing fine beer at Benedictine Brewery, they intend to uphold the tradition.

Taste and Believe!

Fr. Martin Grassel, O.S.B.