

Molto Malto

A revolution is brewing in the foothills of the Italian Alps



BY ERICA DUECY

BEER AFICIONADOS USED TO QUIP THAT THERE WAS ONLY one brew worth ordering in Italy: wine. But Italians seem to have a growing thirst for artisan beers, and the country has transformed from the brunt of beer jokes into a craft-brewing innovator. Whether experimenting with new techniques or using local ingredients to give beer “terroir,” Italian brewers are turning out new styles of beer — and winning international awards along the way.

Just years ago, Italy counted just a handful of craft breweries, plus the multinational lager brands Peroni, Moretti, and Nastro Azzurro. Now there are more than 400 artisan brewers sudsing up Italy’s wine-drinking culture, and many of those have opened just in the past five years, says Michael Opalenski of B. United International, the leading American importer of Italian craft beers.

Many of Italy’s best beers are made in its most renowned wine region, Piedmont, in the backyard of Barolo and Barbaresco. The province is also home to the Slow Food movement and the city of Turin, as well as 53 ski resorts, including Bardonecchia, Sauze d’Oulx, and Sestriere. Especially at après-ski bars and mountain-top restaurants, one finds more beer being sipped than ever before. “The beers are in contention with wine, so they have higher alcohol,” says Peter Hepp, head brewer at New York’s Birreria at Eataly, an Italian food hall that hails from Turin. “And the food is richer in the north, so the higher alcohol helps cut through the richness.” Hepp, who apprenticed under Italian brewers, notes that most of Italy’s artisan beers are made to pair with foods instead of being sipped alone.

Along with higher alcohols — usually 8 percent and higher — flavor complexity is a recurring theme in these artisan beers. A few of the better Piedmont brews available in the States includes Birrificio Grado Plato’s Strada San Felice, a richly flavored chestnut ale; Birrificio Montegioco’s Demon Hunter, a strong amber ale; Pausa Café’s Tosta, a bitter, cacao-infused specialty brew; and Birrificio Troll’s Shangrila, a dark spiced ale.



In Piedmont towns like Bardonecchia, beer — often made and seasoned with local ingredients — has earned a place of honor next to some of the great Italian wines.



Shangrila, for one, is a fascinating beer that starts sweet but finishes with a spicy, savory kick. The recipe includes tandoori spices — coriander, cumin, cardamom, garlic, and ginger — as well as black pepper and anise. Instead of merely pairing well with foods from turkey to venison, the beer actually adds a new dimension to their flavors.

Compared with wine, “beer has more than acidity to complement and contrast food,” Hepp explains. “There’s bitterness, spiciness, flavor complexity. Beer has many ingredients, where wine is made just from grapes.”

While some brewers find wine to be one-dimensional, others are looking to incorporate Piedmont’s rich winemaking tradition into their beers. Valter Loverier, founder of LoverBeer, uses winemaking techniques, and sources local Piedmontese ingredients like Freisa grapes from the hills surrounding Turin, Barbera grapes from Alba, and tiny plums from a nearby valley. “I brew products strongly related to my country,” Loverier says. The grape must (skins and seeds left after grapes are pressed) is added to some of his brews, while wine yeasts are used instead of beer yeasts in other recipes. LoverBeer’s popular Madamin, a sour amber ale, is fermented and aged in oak barrels just like a red wine.

Inspired by the Piedmont’s Slow Food ethos, at least one brewery — Le Baladin — is going so far as to grow its own grains and hops to give beers an Italian terroir, the sense of place so celebrated in wines from the region. Beginning in 2013, 95 percent of Le Baladin’s ingredients will be grown in Italy, including hops. And there are grander plans. “In the next eight years, the target is to become independent, producing everything ourselves: barley, hops, yeasts, and energy — we use solar energy,” says Paolo Fontana of Le Baladin.

Le Baladin’s founder, Matterino “Teo” Musso, is viewed as a pioneering star in the Italian beer scene. He started with a brewpub in Piozzo near Turin in 1986, and was one of the country’s earliest

craft brewers, starting his own brewery in 1996. Today, he operates proprietary brewpubs throughout Italy and is one of the partners in New York’s Birreria at Eataly. Musso has been a key innovator in the movement, rethinking everything from basic beer ingredients to the vessels the brews are bottled in (he uses custom-shaped wine bottles).

One of Le Baladin’s well-known beers, Nora, is inspired by an ancient-Egyptian recipe that swaps out malted barley — the most common grain used to make beer — for unmalted kamut, an ancient grain. Most of the hops, which are typically used for bitterness and antibacterial qualities, are replaced by myrrh, a bitter tree resin.

In related experiments, breweries like Birrifificio di Como are using alternative bittering agents. Birrifificio di Como uses rue, a strongly scented local herb, to add bitter notes to its Malthus Baluba, a double-malted stout that is flavored with pineapple and apricots. Others, like Birrifificio Montegioco, use locally harvested herbs (thyme, juniper) and fruit (blueberries, cherries, peaches) to flavor their beers.

The best part about Italy’s new brews? They’re finally making their way stateside. B. United’s American sales of these beers have rallied recently, bounding up 80 percent per year for each of the past three years. But that doesn’t mean these beers are easy to find — or inexpensive. The bottles we recommend here range from \$8 for 11 ounces to \$55 for 25 ounces. For the best chance of finding them, try a high-end Italian restaurant or a well-stocked beer shop in a major city.*

Or even better: Maybe this is the inspiration you needed to book a ski-and-suds trip to the Italian Alps to sample them at the source. Just don’t tell any Italian beer jokes. ●

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