

The prodigal brewer

Belgo Sapiens, one of the country's newest breweries, brings influences from across the Atlantic. In a can. **John Rega** asks if Belgium is ready.

A can of wheat beer labeled with a “rock and roll” rabbit. A German-inspired pils with corn alongside Belgian malt. An amber ale américaine with rye. A decidedly un-English porter. Where’s all this coming from?

Nivelles, actually. Specifically, the Belgo Sapiens Brewers. The startup shipped its first beer in September, but is already making its mark by drawing on experience abroad.

Damien Demunter, co-owner and manager, along with Mathieu Lainé and Frederic Delsaut has returned home to Belgium after 13 years abroad, overseeing brewing for a brew pub chain in France and Canada. Now he and his partners are making the entrepreneurial leap themselves, and capitalizing on their North American exposure.

“We wanted to do something more US-like,” Demunter explains. “But we’re Belgian, so we wanted to do that, too.” He pitches Belgo Sapiens as “a craft beer movement like you see happening in the US, or even the UK or Denmark.” That, he adds, “is only now starting in Belgium.”

Forget American hop-bombs and boozy Imperials, though. Drinkability comes first for these “thinking Belgians.” Alcohol ranges from 4.8 percent to just 6 percent. Their bitterness is pronounced but respectful of local norms, balanced by malt character and other flavors.

The trans-Atlantic influence is perhaps most apparent in the choice of vessel. Across the pond these days, beer-greek credibility comes in a can, and Belgo Sapiens is on trend.

It’s a leap, not to mention extra cost, in a market so attached to its glassware that Trappist breweries distinguish themselves by bottle shape. But Demunter assures

that his Canadian canning equipment offers quality beyond the macro lagers and heavy ales in night-shop refrigerators.

“It’s about education,” he says. A sealed can offers perfect protection against light and, with state-of-the-art containers, won’t affect flavor. A comparative tasting among beer fans in Brussels detected, maybe, some subtle variations in mouth-feel. Not for long, Demunter insists. “You might find some differences but it’s not because of the packaging, it’s because of us learning the equipment,” he says.

Lightweight aluminium offers more advantages in transport and recyclability. “Carbon footprint” is not just the head lacing the side of your glass, apparently.

The packaging itself makes a subtle case for its quality. Besides bigger and crisper graphics, the cans give space for statistical minutiae to assure the beer hunters they’re getting serious goods. Belgo Sapiens is making the most of those benefits.

Polarius, the lager kicking off the brewery’s range, has instant shelf appeal in its 50cl green can emblazoned with the “hop man.” The cartoon antihero, berobed in the leaves and cones of the bittering flower, doesn’t stand out as well from the confines of a 33cl bottle label.

Down the side, the can goes beyond the Belgian staples of alcohol content and serving temperature, to list original gravity in degrees Plato, International Bittering Units -- a rating of 30, in classic pils territory -- and color statistics showing it’s a bit darker than the German style.

While the hop man is a distinctly Belgian style of serious comic-book illustration, the brew itself combines German hops with American inspiration from Demunter’s travels in the Pacific Northwest.

Those hops furnish a finely edged,

clean and lemony bitterness. The malt structure balances it all out with a sweetness that may link to the corn used in the brew. Scorned by many craft brewers as a corner-cutting adjunct, the maize in the Polarius is chosen to lighten the mouth feel, Demunter explains. There’s no cost savings in the low quantity he buys. Plus Belgo Sapiens -- incorporated under the name Brasserie Ceres Belgique -- always planned to use the gamut of cereals.

Turning to wheat, Blanche de Thines is the most immediately Belgian in style. Its hazy straw color evokes summer aperitifs and pots of mussels. Yet it offers a more muted spice profile than local standard-bearers. There’s some pepper but it’s light on citrus, funneling to a clean finish.

The witbier also carries the rabbit mascot, designed by the Mons artist who penned the hop man. “It’s a bit rock and roll,” Demunter says of the somewhat Goth-looking bunny. The theme continues with a punk skunk for the porter and a badass-looking owl on the amber.

That American-style amber, dubbed Colonel Arch, entices with aromas of burnt caramel and coffee. The rye contributes to the malt-forward character, with its characteristically clean finish.

The porter, named P’tit Granit after the stonemasons of Hainaut province, maintains that quaffability, with more of the French Roast flavors and hints of chocolate. By design, it’s thinner in body than the London style.

“We wanted, first and foremost, beers with good drinkability that we like,” Demunter says.

Surely there’s an IPA to come, Demunter allows, given the trans-Atlantic influences at work. That’ll arrive when the market and the brewer are ready. ■



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