

Bohemian rhapsody

Decades of turmoil once threw the Czech brewing industry into disarray. But now a new breed of brewers are working hard to bring it back to its former glory. JACOPO MAZZEO travelled to Bohemia to meet the makers who are behind this exciting revolution

I wonder what Josef Groll would make of today's Czech brewing industry. In the mid-19th century Bavarian-born brewmaster Groll moved to Bohemia and helped create a style that today is synonymous with beer: Bohemian lager. Over the course of the past century, while the style was becoming a global phenomenon, the Czech Republic went through decades of turbulence that climaxed with a 40-year totalitarian regime

– compliments of the Soviet Union. Its shutting down of small regional breweries to centralise production saw the number of Czech breweries plummet from several hundreds to a measly 50 by 1989, when the pacific Velvet Revolution established a modern democratic system in the country.

Thankfully, the Bohemians never lost their lager-making skills, passion for quality beer and seriously unquenchable thirst. Today's Bohemia is bustling with



FROM LEFT
CLOCKWISE:
ALBRECHT CASTLE,
DVA KOHOUTI'S
BREWMASTER
LUKÁŠ TOMSA,
KUTNÁ HORA
BEFORE WWII



confident entrepreneurs willing to bring the region's rich brewing culture back to its former glory.

FORWARD THINKING

I travel to the town of Cvikov, by the northern-Bohemian border with Germany. There, Pivovar Cvikov had brewed uninterruptedly from 1874 up until 1968, when production was discontinued by the communist regime. A former employee expressed his disdain over the decision by leaving a rather explicit note on the wall ('Vojta, that asshole, closed the brewery on 1 January 1968'), so when the brewery finally reopened in 2013, the current owner decided to leave the writing untouched as a testimony to Cvikov's – and Bohemia's



WHAT MAKES THE PERFECT BOHEMIAN LAGER?

INGREDIENTS

First and foremost, soft water, which is generally understood as perfectly suited to brewing lagers.

Malted barley comes from Moravia, Czechia's warmer and drier region, with hops from Bohemia itself. The most common aromatic hop is Saaz.

PRODUCTION METHOD

Traditionally, Bohemian lagers are made through decoction mashing (as opposed to infusion), where a portion of the mash is moved to a separate vessel, boiled to extract more starches from the grains, then returned to the main mash. This process is responsible for Bohemian lagers' characteristic caramelised flavours and deep golden-to-amber colour. Decoction can be repeated up to three times, but a double-decoction is the most common technique.

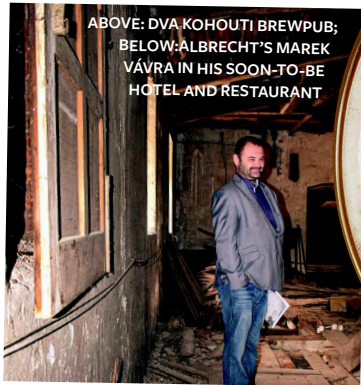
At the end of the fermentation stage, always conducted with bottom-fermenting yeast at temperatures between 8°C-12°C, Czech brewers scrap the layer of foam that forms on top of the wort to remove the bittering compounds that would make the beer's mouthfeel too astringent.

Last but not least, lagering (maturation) needs to be long and conducted at cool temperatures. The colder the temperature, the longer the beer will need to reach maturity. An 8° lager matures for about one month while a 12° potentially twice as long. At Regent brewery, for instance, a 16° can rest for up to five months.

CZECH BEER NUMBERS UNPACKED

In the Czech Republic it's still customary to indicate beer strength by the plato gravity scale (° or °P) rather than alcohol by volume (abv), as it's common elsewhere. These numbers, which normally range between 8° to 14°, indicate the concentration of sugars in the wort before fermentation, but don't give a precise indication of the final alcohol content. Don't despair just yet though, there's a simple trick that will give you a rough estimate of the beer's abv. Just divide the plato by two and subtract one. So a 10° is of roughly 4% abv, a 13° would be around 5.5% abv and so on...

ABOVE: DVA KOHOUTI BREWPUB;
BELOW: ALBRECHT'S MAREK
VÁVRA IN HIS SOON-TO-BE
HOTEL AND RESTAURANT



– controversial past. Framing that 50 year old message of resentment is a brand new, sleek Pivovar Cvikv, equipped with an on-site restaurant and hotel, dressed up in a minimalist, contemporary style.

While showing me around the brewery, director and brewer Viktor Tkadlec shares the secrets to making great Bohemian lager. From the light and refreshing Sklář 8° to the darker and fuller Sváteční 13°, those delicious and reassuringly traditional Bohemian lagers taste of stoic resilience.

I move further west from Cvikv, on the Bohemian border with Poland, to visit Pivovar Albrecht. Unlike Cvikv, Albrecht is embracing global trends with open arms; yet the two breweries' backstories are disturbingly similar.

Albrecht brewery was named after military leader Albrecht von Wallenstein

and its pedigree dates back to the 16th century. Its decline started at the end of WWII, before production eventually ceased with the last batch in 1949. In the following decades it became a dairy farm, then market hall, then scrapyard. The result? By the early 90s the building was rotting. In 2010, when the local council

Those delicious and reassuringly traditional Bohemian lagers taste of stoic resilience

was contemplating turning it into a parking lot, local entrepreneur Marek Vávra decided to save this 'jewel' – as he calls it – of Bohemian brewing history. He took ownership, partially restored the building and restarted production in 2014.

Today, the building is still in a pretty rugged state and would give health and



LEFT TO RIGHT: BEERS ON OFFER AT ALBRECHT BREWERY, KUTNÁ HORA'S BREWMASER JAKUB HÁJEK, ALBRECHT BREWERY



Hájek's enthusiasm for the acetic acids is commendable, and pairs well with his genuine drive to revive this once-decrepit historical brewery

TO FOAM OR NOT TO FOAM?

How to pour the perfect Czech lager

The amount of head isn't a purely aesthetic choice. A good head protects beer from oxygen, helping the liquid to retain carbonation and fresh aromas.

Furthermore, Czech tapmasters claim that the ratio of foam to beer affects the beer's texture and the perception of its flavour components too.

The perfect lager may be served according to four different styles:

Hladinka With three fingers of foam on top of the liquid. This is considered the standard pour. It's what you'll get if you don't make your preference explicit.

Šnyt (pronounced shnit) Two parts liquid, three parts foam.

Mléko Meaning 'milk' for obvious reasons. This is the 'last round' pour, for when your stomach has expanded while the rest of the party, for some inexplicable reason, is still craving more.

Cochtan Basically no foam at all, which makes the beer over carbonated and dangerously exposed to oxygen.

Unsurprisingly, it's the least common of all pouring styles in the Czech Republic. Guess where it's the most popular instead?

safety inspectors a heart attack, but Vávra claims that an on-premise restaurant and hotel are in the pipeline.

Vávra's forward-looking attitude is reflected in his stylistic choices. The brewing kit is designed for the production of international-style ales, with closed fermenters and vertical maturation tanks. The medium-hard quality of the local water, which is used untreated, is apt for the production of ales too, and gives the brewery's lagers a sort of Anglophile twist.

ALL IN THE DETAILS

Where the communists aren't to blame, the harshest expression of capitalism is in the case of central-Bohemian brewery Kutná Hora. With the first batch dating back to 1573, the brewery Kutná Hora kept on making beer until the early 2000s, when it was bought out (and shortly after shut down) by Heineken.

In 2015, the building was finally purchased by the current owner, who soon undertook major restoration works and by early 2017 Kutná Hora was releasing its first modern batch.

While the new brewery is now fully operational, production is nowhere near its full capacity target. A trivial detail for young brewmaster Jakub Hájek, who's confident that this will be reached within five to eight years. During my visit, he proudly highlights that all the technologies

used in the brewery are of Czech origin, and just as proudly hands me a bite of his own – very Czech – homemade bacteria-infected pickled cottage cheese (a local delicacy, so he says). It tastes foul.

Yet, Hájek's enthusiasm for the acetic acids is commendable, and pairs well with his genuine drive to revive this once-decrepit historical brewery. I take a full bite and smile.

There's no risk of bacteria infections in the beers though. Hájek adopts a meticulous attention to detail when it comes to cleaning and sanitation. He's even got a dedicated room for ale brewing, to make sure there's no cross-contamination between top fermenting yeast and his own precious strain of lager yeast.

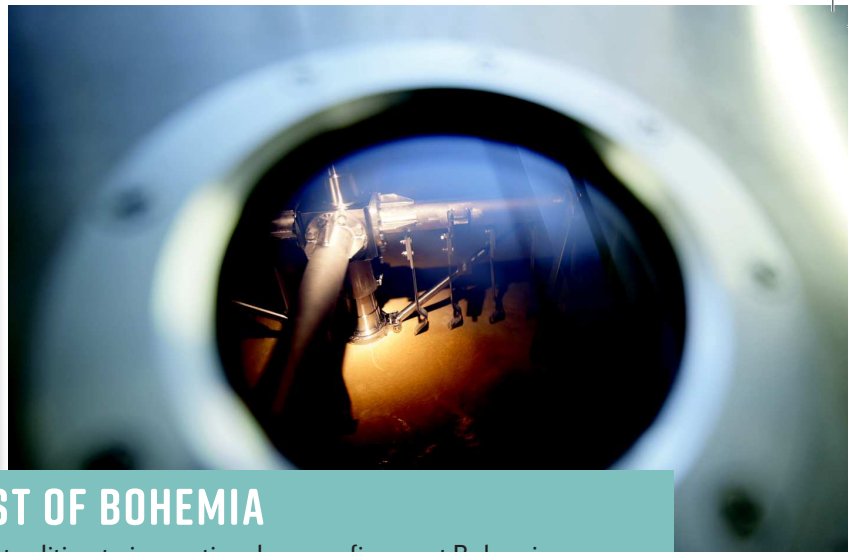
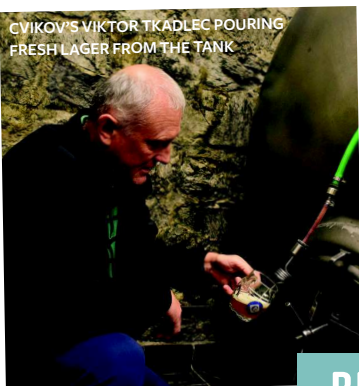
The beers all speak an unmistakable Bohemian dialect. Even the more unconventional brews, such as his Citra-dry hopped Kanec 13° lager or his Red King red ale, all taste clean, round, clearly Bohemian.

THE PERFECT SERVE

Visit a Bohemian brewery and you get to taste the good stuff straight from the tank. Heavenly liquid, pure delight.

I must admit though, that once fully mature and properly poured from the tap, Bohemian lagers become real epiphanies, as proper beer service can seriously enhance the final taste of the beer. Prague brewpub Dva Kohouti pushes the typically

CVIKOV'S VIKTOR TKADLEC POURING FRESH LAGER FROM THE TANK



BEST OF BOHEMIA

From tradition to innovation, here are five great Bohemian lagers to try

KUTNÁ HORA KUTNOHORSKÁ STŘÍBRNÁ 11°

A perfect example of light, sessionable Bohemian lager. Made through double decoction and matured for about two months, it's relatively pale in colour and medium bodied. Clean, with a hint of breadiness on the palate, the rest is a beautiful duet between hoppy herbaceousness and floral maltiness. (Unfiltered and unpasteurised.) 4.5% abv, £28.89/20x500ml; £81.23/30l; £130.60/50l; Euroboozer, euroboozer.co.uk



MUFLON DRY HOP 12°

Made at the recently established Kunratice brewery (2014), near Prague, this is one of the many beers in its Muflon range. The dry hopping denotes some international influence, yet the use of Saaz rather than a more exotic hop variety helps the beer retain its elegant Bohemian character. (Unfiltered and unpasteurised.) That said, Kunratice makes a number of more explicitly international-style ales, such as IPAs, a hoppy red ale, and an impressive 22° imperial stout. 5% abv, £167/50l, Euroboozer, euroboozer.co.uk



CVIKOV KLÍČ 12°

Only traditional ingredients go into this fascinating depiction of traditional Bohemian brewing: Pilsner malt from Moravia, Premiant hop for bitterness and Saaz for aroma. It spends at least 40 days in the maturation tank. No words can do it justice, it needs to be experienced. (Unfiltered and unpasteurised.) 4.8% abv, £90.36/30l; £146.14/50l, Euroboozer, euroboozer.co.uk



REGENT PREZIDENT 14°

Established in 1379 in the southern-Bohemian town of Trebon, Regent has been making beer ever since, with just a few hiccups along the way (minor things like WWII and the Nazi occupation, for instance.) Prezident is indulgent, similar in style to a golden German bock, with marked fruity palate and elegant hoppiness on the nose. 6% abv, £149.23/50l, Euroboozer, euroboozer.co.uk



ALBRECHT MÄRZEN 14°

The brewery's most traditional-tasting beer is a sign that the guys mastered the basics before they went about experimenting with international styles. It's copper in colour, fruity and caramelly on the nose, with a bit of peach and nectarine. The palate is creamy and sweet, with good hop presence in the finish to bring balance. 5% abv, £26.24/6x750ml, Euroboozer, euroboozer.co.uk



Bohemian top-notch beer service to its limits. Each beer line is set to its own temperature: 'the coldest line is for light lagers, at around 2°C to 4.5°C... while dark, Belgian and English beers are served warmer at 5°C-8°C,' says brewmaster Lukáš Tomsa, adding that 'these are really cold temperatures, but if you get the first sip of the beer a bit colder, the last is still at a proper temperature'.

Glasses are all cleaned by hand rather than in a glasswasher to ensure there's no residue of detergent left, which would

Once fully mature and properly poured from the tap, Bohemian lagers become real epiphanies

affect head retention, then kept in cold water to avoid the risk of temperature shock while pouring. It's at this stage that the art of the tapmaster comes into play. Their role is to serve beer with the correct ratio of foam to liquid (see box on previous page), as this, explains Tomsa, has a huge impact on taste and texture.

Whether it's about classic recipes, international styles or pristine beer service, the Czechs are pumping new life into their centenary brewing heritage.

It's thanks to a rising number of Bohemian brewers who can picture a modern production site beyond smashed windows, rotting floors and debris that Bohemia is back at the centre of the world's brewing stage. Na zdraví. 🍻