



The Epicurean Traveler in Munich: Part Three, BEER, OKTOBERFEST, AND ITS MUSEUM

by Lucy Gordan | Travel, Travel blog



©2010

Think Germany and certainly one of the first images that comes to mind is a stein overflowing with a frothy beer. Few countries, maybe only Belgium, can come near to matching Germany for the quality and variety of its beer. Over 1,270 breweries nationwide produce 5,000 different labels of beer. Eighty percent of all breweries in Europe and forty percent of those worldwide are located in Germany; they produce ten percent of the world's beer output. Thus it may come as a surprise that after their separation from Slovakia, the Czechs with 160 liters *per capita* annually are the world champion beer drinkers. They are followed by the Germans who consume 130 liters *per capita* annually.

Germany's biggest breweries are in the northern city of Dortmund, where a stop at the favorite beer hall *Hövels Hausbrauerei* is a must. Cologne and Düsseldorf in the Rhine region produce "old-fashioned" beers similar to English ales. In Cologne they are best enjoyed at *Brauhaus Sion*, *Früh am Dom*, *Päffgen*, and *Brauerei zur Malzmühle*, where the local brew, *kölsch*, is served in narrow glasses



called *kölschstangen* brought to the table by a *köbe* or waiter in a special tray with holes for the *kölschstangen*. But *kölsch*, its history and its rituals, is a story in itself for an upcoming article. In Düsseldorf go straight to *Zum Uerige*, a microbrewery of the same name, and to *Zum Schlüssel* which also serves a special *Sauerbraten* and sauerkraut soup.

Although, with twenty, Cologne is the city with the largest number of breweries, Bavaria is the region with the largest number of breweries and beer traditions, so it's only logical that the Bavarians (together with the *Saarlanders*) are the Germans who drink the most beer. Ultimately, all beer routes lead to



Munich, the capital of Bavaria nicknamed the “capital of beer” because of its famous breweries, large beer halls and gardens, and of course Oktoberfest, the most indulgent beer festival on earth. Nevertheless this thirst-quenching very popular drink was not invented here.

Beer is one of the world's oldest beverages, probably dating back to the 6th millennium BC. The earliest Sumerian writings contain references to beer, but it's also likely that beer-like home-brewed beverages were invented in several ancient cultures throughout the world; for certain in China, Syria, Babylonia, Peru, and Egypt, where it was used for medicinal purposes and included in burial provisions for the journey to the hereafter. It appears that the Egyptians taught the Greeks how to brew beer, who later taught the Romans, who in turn, beginning in c. 55 BC, taught the northern tribes they conquered. In his treatise *Germania* published in 98 AD, the Roman historian Tacitus mentions the Nordics' liking for beer and for gambling.

During the rise of Christianity, the popularity of beer grew tremendously. This was primarily due to the fact that monasteries were some of the first organizations to brew beer as a tax-free trade. Monks built breweries as part of their “mission” to provide food, shelter, and drink to travelers and pilgrims. Because beer is a beverage and not a foodstuff, the clergy was allowed to drink it as a source of nourishment during Lent and on other days of fasting.

There are four important dates in Bavarian beer history. The earliest dates to the early 15th century when the Emperor Sigismund (1410-37) revoked the monks' tax-free status and forbid



Oktoberfest at night

them to sell beer so as to increase his own revenues. A century later, in 1516 William IV, Duke of Bavaria, adopted the *Reinheitsgebot* (Purity Law), perhaps the oldest food regulation still in use (it was formally passed as a German law in 1987). The *Gebot* ordered that the ingredients of beer be restricted to water, barley, and hops; yeast was added to the list after Louis Pasteur's discovery in 1857. The only exception is *weiss* or *weizenbier* made from wheat. The Bavarian law was applied throughout Germany as part of the 1871 German unification as the German empire under Otto von Bismarck, and has since been updated to reflect modern trends in beer brewing. To this day, the *Gebot* is considered a

mark of purity in beers, although this is controversial. The third notable date is 1803 when monasteries were secularized and their breweries sold to private citizens. And last, but probably the most important, is October 12, 1810, the wedding day of the Bavarian Crown Prince Ludwig (later known as King Ludwig I) and Princess Therese from Saxony-

Hildburghausen (namesake of the *Theresienwiese* 42-acre festival grounds). Five days later, the National Guard organized a public horse race so that the common folk could also partake in the wedding celebration. In 1819 it was decided that the festival should be repeated at the same time every year, which marked the birth of the Oktober Festival, or "Oktoberfest," one of the most famous events in Germany and the world's largest 16-day fair, which for the past several years has counted over six million revelers annually. Around 70% come from Bavaria, another 15% from other parts of Germany and the remaining 15% from all around the world.



This year marks the 200th anniversary of this unique folk festival. Since its beginnings the Oktoberfest has been cancelled 24 times due to war, cholera epidemics, and other emergencies. On Saturday, September 18th, the Schottenhamel tent with seating for over

10,000 — one of the largest of the Oktoberfest's fourteen tents — was (and always is) the place to be if you want to catch the official opening ceremonies. At noontime, the Lord Mayor has the honor of tapping the first keg of Oktoberfest beer — a tradition since 1950 — calling out "O'zapft is" which means "It's tapped" in Austro-Bavarian dialect. After the mayor gives the first beer to the Minister-President of the State of Bavaria, the public begins to quench its thirst until October 3 (this year). A special event this year was the daily re-enactment of the horse race (for the first time since 1960) in historical costume.

If you cannot make it to this year's Oktoberfest, but come to Munich at a different time of year, as I did last June, thanks to the generosity of the Munich Tourist Board and the Geisel family, be sure to join one of the many Beer and Brewery Tours offered on the internet. At the Münchner Stadt Museum (Munich City Museum, www.stadtmuseum-online.de) an exhibition: 'The Oktoberfest 1810-2010' brings the Oktoberfest's history to life. And don't miss the Beer and Oktoberfest Museum. Tucked away on a narrow street called Sternecker at no. 2, it's located two blocks from the city's main square *Marienplatz* and from its picturesque 800-year-old food market, *Viktualienmarkt*. Opened in September, 2005, the Museum's six-storey building, Munich oldest residential building, dating to a round 1340, was constructed after the great fire of 1327, which destroyed a third of the city. Some of the façade paintings have been restored and some of the original wooden beams have been salvaged, as have the central "Heaven's Stairs," which are a typical feature of Munich's medieval architecture. These led upstairs where there were three apartments on the second, third, and fourth floors, each having a kitchen with a chimney opening into one big chimney for the building, a sitting room, and a bedroom, for a total of twelve apartments. (Don't be put off by these steep stairs; there's also elevator and wheelchair access).



I suggest starting your tour here with the 12-minute documentary in German with English sub-



Better not to drink the beer before climbing the Oktoberfest Museum's stairs!

titles, which presents a concise history of beer, its production, and a brief history of the Oktoberfest. Another good source on Oktoberfest is the *Wikipedia* encyclopedia which not only provides a history of the event, but statistics on the different events at each tent, their layout and that of all the facilities at the grounds, the smoking rules, the hours and fees, the amount of food and drink consumed in 2007, and the dates of the future Oktoberfests through 2015, because it is widely recommended to make travel, hotel, and Oktoberfest reservations at least six months ahead.

The Museum's displays begin on the second floor. A privileged guest, I was given a private tour by its Czech-born first and only Director, Lukas Bulka, whose first job at age 15 was serving in a beer garden belonging to the Schottenhamel family, local restaurateurs who still run a large tent at the Oktoberfest. He then moved on to work for the Geisel family, now for four generations the kings of hospitality in Munich, rotating jobs between their four first class and deluxe hotels and Michelin-starred restaurants.

All the Museum's displays and artifacts have explanations in both German and English. Those on the second floor are devoted to the history of beer brewing, particularly in Munich, plus the reconstruction of what an apartment's kitchen would have looked like in the 19th century. In Munich there used to be over 100 breweries, so, although beer was not invented here, Munich was influential in the history of brewing beer. The Museum owns a large collection of early (c. 1860s) beer bottles, of steins of all different shapes, materials, and sizes, not to mention attractions like a fat lady's mirror, magician props and posters as well as souvenirs from many of the Oktoberfests.



19th century kitchen in the Oktoberfest museum

The first recorded brewery in the area dates to 1040. It was a Benedictine monastery,

Weihenstephan in Freising, and is now The Technical University of Munich and the center of world brewing technology. Today there are only six breweries left in Munich: Augustiner, Hofbräu (nicknamed “Haus,” which belongs to the state of Bavaria), and the others, Löwenbräu, Paulaner, Hacker-Pschorr, and Spaten, which have been sold to big international beer companies. (For a history of these six breweries click on www.beerdrinkersguide.com).

The third floor is the “clubhouse” of the Oktoberfest Museum, which was founded almost 40 years ago by Xaver Heilmannseeder, late proprietor of the Löwenbräukellers and of the Löwenbräu tent at the Oktoberfest. Heilmannseeder left considerable funds in his will to enable the club to organize temporary exhibitions about Oktoberfest, such current photo exhibition on the fourth floor called “1328,” the year the Augustiner brewery was founded. The fifth and sixth floors house the Museum’s archives and the director’s office.

An eye-catching display is a case with several medieval clay mugs and pitchers, each glazed grey with a blue Star-of-David. “They have no association with Judaism,” Bulka told me. “Rather they are associated with the chemistry – fire and water – used in beer brewing during the 14th century. One explanation is the point at the top symbolizes the fire necessary to brew beer and the point at the bottom symbolizes the water you need to draw from underground to make beer. Another is that, since in the 14th century few people could read, if the Star-of-David was hung outside, people knew it was a place they could get fresh beer. Another sign for fresh beer is called a ‘Hop’s Crown’. There’s one hanging out at the wood-paneled and beamed Spatenhaus in front of the Opera House; ours dates to 1850.”



Other interesting items are a guild’s ark from around 1650 where the brewers locked their documents and recipes, and a beer brewers’ guild meeting board, on which each brewer who attended would hang his name, a bit like clocking in on the job. It dates to 1798 when the *Frauenkirche* (Church of Our Lady), Munich’s cathedral, and *Peterskirche* (St. Peter’s Church) regulated how much beer each brewer could produce and sell. “We take the ark out every two years on Brewers’ Day,” Bulka told me. “This year it’s on June 19. There’s a procession downtown at which the new brewers get their diploma.”



Oompah! Oompha!

Still another, although only a small model, is the cooling machine made by the Linder Company. It produced ice, which was a major breakthrough for brewers because it not only allowed them to produce top-quality beer all year round but also to export it.

“Every year we get more and more visitors. We’re now up to about 20,000; about 80% are German,” said Bulka. “At first we weren’t in the guide books, but now we are. We’re obviously also a destination of the many private beer tours of Munich. If someone clicks on our website and then on info@Bier-und-Oktoberfestmuseum.de, we can arrange an English-language tour of the Museum and provide contacts for beer tours and tastings.

“Open from Tuesday to Saturday from 1-7 PM with an entrance fee of 4 Euros, the Museum is privately-owned,” Bulka continued, “by the Edith-Haberland-Wagner Foundation which also owns over 50% of the *Augustiner Bräu*. Established in 1328, this brewery, the oldest still independent brewery in Munich, had belonged to the Wagner family and Edith Haberland-Wagner, who died eleven years ago, was the last Wagner. Of course, it had belonged to the Augustine Order of monks until the secularization of all monasteries in 1803. Anton and Therese Wagner bought the brewery from the monks in 1829. The other monastic breweries were also bought by private people then too.” Today there are only eleven monasteries in all of Germany that produce their own beer. The best-known one is Benedictine Rococo “*Kloisters Andechs*,” founded in 1455 in the district of Starnberg in Upper Bavaria about an hour’s drive from Munich.

In spite of its proximity to the world-famous *Hofbräuhaus* and the *Augustiner Grossgastätten*, one of the several restaurants in the city serving Munich’s cult beer, don’t leave the Museum without stopping at its very own *keller* on the ground floor (open from 5 PM-midnight) for a beer tasting, a stein and a choice of very reasonably-priced snacks: pretzels and cheese or traditional full meals: goulash, sausages, and *schnitzel*. I recommend the *spargel* (asparagus) if they’re in season. The *keller*, which can accommodate up to 110 people, is open to the general public as well as for private parties, even without visiting the museum. It serves all Augustiner beers and rotates those of one of Munich’s other five breweries each month.

& & &

Lucy Gordan is an award-winning travel writer and cultural journalist living in Rome, where she is Epicurean-Traveler.com's Bureau Chief. She can be reached at gordan@attglobal.net. Her website is www.lucygordan.com. Links to other recent articles by Lucy Gordan:



Munich Part 1: [Tantris](#)

Munich Part 2: [The Geisel Family](#)

[Daniela Kramaric](#)

[Giancarlo Zigante](#)

[Emanuele Scarello](#)

[Elena Kostioukovitch](#)

City