



# TRAPPIST TREATS IN THE LOW LANDS

Coming from a country where he considered Castle as king, **Marnus Hattingh** found an experience with European Trappist beers was a little like swapping his lunchbox sarmies for a Jamie Oliver creation. We join him on a Belgian beer tour in search of some *abdijsbiere*.

**T**hrough an intricate link involving Tintin, the Aussie rock band Midnight Oil, and the historical connection between Afrikaans and Dutch, many years ago

I became pen pals with a guy from Antwerpen in northern Flanders, Belgium. And so, on a visit to his hometown, we went out for a drink. Sometime later someone shoved a bowl-shaped beer glass into my hand and uttered those immortal words of the late evening partygoer: try this.

I did, and was hooked. It was a Westmalle Dubbel, a highly decorated Belgian beer brewed by monks behind the walls of their picturesque abbey rebuilt in the early 20th-century. Dark in colour, with a rich complexity, it was quite an awakening for someone used to South Africa's pale lagers.

Belgium is very much a Catholic country, and in some of the denominations it is considered a virtue for the abbey to be self-reliant. Of course, to live a quiet life and pray seven times a day is valued as well. But to be self-sufficient – to grow your own vegetables, tend to the chickens and pigs, farm honey, and bake bread – that is the ultimate calling.

#### A BEERY PILGRIMAGE

Beer has long been a part of monastic life. With water from the local streams not always of the best quality, the monks treated it with barley, herbs, a rigorous boil and of course, a period of fermentation to make it into something they could offer as safe refreshment to visiting pilgrims. In some abbeys, beers were even considered as part of each monk's daily ration, together with friar Bernoldus' basket of eggs, honey and bread.

Today only a handful of monasteries still brew their own beer on site. In fact, since a set of rules was set up in the modern era to control what constitutes a Trappist beer (very much like our own "estate wines" are regulated), only 14 abbeys – all from the Trappist order – qualify as makers of true Trappist beer. And six of those are dotted across Belgium.

When a recent work trip to Holland provided an opportunity to stay behind in Europe for a couple of days, I got myself a car, brought out the paper maps and plotted



**Light enough for a devout monk to sip on and still continue his day of praying**

a three-day road trip across Belgium, linking five of the country's Trappist breweries, plus one of its most famous "abbey beers". Unfortunately the Achel monastery in the far northeast slipped off my radar and agenda, meaning I'm destined to recreate the in full one day.

I picked my car up at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport, then dashed on the highway south, crossing the border into Belgium just north of Antwerpen, then headed all the way down to the Ardenne in the southeast of Wallonia, Belgium's French speaking corner. It's a leafy, hilly, farmland area of the country.

It took some three hours to reach the abbey of Maredsous, a large monastery set on top of a hill in the middle of a quiet forest. Maredsous is not a Trappist brewery, but I stopped at the Gothic-like abbey to stretch the legs, walk in the tranquil grounds, taste the pater's cheese and, of course, sip on a Maredsous Bruin, the brewery's dubbel, full of dried fruit and caramel flavours.

#### ACQUIRING NEW TASTES

The road meandered further south into the green hills for an hour, after which I parked in front of an abbey called Orval, secluded in a remote valley. It's a big complex of buildings, and next door the shop is filled with souvenirs, while a modern cafeteria provides a comprehensive menu including something sought after by beer lovers. Orval is famous for producing just one beer, but at the abbey you can taste the *patersbier*, Orval Vert, named for the green glass it was once bottled in. I preferred it to the classic Orval, whose characteristic dryness and complex tartness take some getting used to.

Next up was the abbey of Rochefort, half an hour's drive away. The abbey is less commercialised and has no shop of its own, but you can buy their beers from one of the cafes in the nearby village of the same name. As with the famous Rochefort cheese, the beer is an acquired taste, particularly for someone used to the simplicity of a light lager. I don't mess around though and opt for a Rochefort 10, the 11.3% ABV quadrupel which is filled with aromas of dried fig and flavours of chocolate and caramel.

My first beer stop the next morning was Scourmont Abbey, where the Chimay beers are brewed under strict supervision of the monks, still using only water from two wells



The stately entrance to the La Trappe abbey, where you can take a delightful beer tour



Prayers to the left, pints to the right



Orval's iconic bowling pin-shaped bottles waiting to be filled (image by J.P. Remy)



Chimay beer and cheese tasting platter



The Maredsous abbey has quite the playful character



The Orval beerglass resembles a traditional goblet.



Entrance to Scourmont Abbey, home of the monks that brew Chimay

within their grounds. I immediately order a Chimay Gold, the monastery's *patersbier*. Lighter than other Trappist brews, the *patersbier* was traditionally brewed for the monks' own use each day – with an alcohol level of around 4% ABV, it was considered light enough for a devout monk to sip on and still continue his day of praying.

The beer was good, but I liked their cheese more. I opted for their smaller platter, which featured four cheeses – Blue, Red, Vieux and Doré. The Doré is the mildest of the four, so I started with that, working my way through the stronger Vieux and Red and finishing with the Blue's sharp and tangy taste. The Vieux was my favourite, as a Gouda lover, and I found it paired perfectly with the slight sweetness of a bottle of Chimay Rouge.

#### A BEER OF LEGEND

A two-hour drive west to the coast of West Flanders followed. From French speaking Wallonia's beautiful greenery and hills to the flatlands of West Flanders' coastline, the views were bleak and uninspiring. Luckily the Beemer ate up the kilometres in silence along the gloomy road as I drove past large cemeteries filled with small, white crosses – a stark reminder of the trench warfare of the First World War where thousands lost their lives in this corner of the world.

As you drive through the village of Vleteren, a sign the size of a pencil case points you towards "Wes-Vleteren Abdij". Zig zag past suburban houses and you arrive at a nondescript entrance. This is the Abbey of St Sixtus, home of the Westvleteren 12, often hailed the best beer in the world. It is simply amazing and a tribute to the monks and their quest for silent devotion and a renouncement of worldly things that the maker of the so-called world's best beer is virtually invisible in its complete absence of any advertising or branding.

The process of purchasing Westvleteren

beers has become as legendary as the beer itself. You can only buy their beers by first making a call to the paters to reserve a crate for you – and nothing more. Volume is strictly monitored, and the monks only sell to individuals, as no shop may sell their beers. Plus you must come and collect it in person, providing the licence plate of the vehicle you'll be driving in advance.

Of course, there is a loophole, with the café across the road from the brewery selling six-packs of the three beers – the blonde, the 10 and the legendary 12 – on a first-come, first served basis. Sadly, it is a Friday when I visit and I find the café closed. Until my next trip I will have to take it from beer lovers around the world that this beer offers an other-worldly experience.

#### HOPPING OVER TO HOLLAND

With the disappointment behind me, it was time for the third and last leg of my Belgian beer dash. I headed northeast, back to Antwerpen, where I swung by the Westmalle Abbey for a glass of dark brown, fully flavoured Westmalle Dubbel: one of my favourites. The final drive took me across the border into the neighbouring Netherlands for a relaxing lunch and beer tour at the abbey of Koningshoeven, better known by the name of its beer label, La Trappe.

Both Westmalle and La Trappe have large, modern cafeterias serving food and beer and it is quite the occasion for locals in each town to come out and have a brunch of beers and wafels.

In a small country that produces over 400 different types of beers, the monasteries form an essential part of the Belgian beer culture. You've done the Cape Wine Route. Next time you're lucky enough to be in Europe, treat yourself to something completely different and sign up for a beer tour – just try and travel with a designated driver so that you can take full advantage of the brews. ☺

ABBEEY	WEBSITE	PUB FACT
Maredsous	maredsousbieres.be	Set in the middle of a forest in large grounds outside the village. Nice cafeteria, big selection of cheeses, breads and beers.
Rocheport	abbaye-rochefort.be	Small abbey outside town. No tours provided nor official tasting room on site. Try their beers in nearby cafes.
Orval	orval.be	Established in 1132, a beautiful monastery set grounds outside of town. Two museums, one showcasing their beers and cheeses, the other their history, plus a cafeteria.
Chimay	chimay.com	Modest but attractive abbey outside town, open to wander the grounds. About 1km away is the cafeteria, where you can sample cheeses, breads and beers. There's also a gift shop.
Westvleteren	trappistwestvleteren.be indevrede.be	Nondescript building closed to tourists. The café across the road is your best bet to taste the beers, but check opening times and arrive early if you're hoping for a takeaway.
Westmalle	trappistwestmalle.be	Large abbey next to busy road, but closed to visitors. There is a big, modern cafeteria opposite though, where families hang out.
La Trappe	latrappetrappist.com	Across the border in neighbouring Holland. Excellent beer tour provided, sizable shop and restaurant.
Achel	achelsekluis.org	Straddling the Belgian-Dutch borders, the monastery houses the only tasting room found within an abbey. Bonus: You can watch the monks working in the brewery whilst sipping your tripel.

## ABBEEY OR TRAPPIST?

The rules surrounding labelling your beer "Trappist" are clear and concise: the beer must be brewed within the walls of a Trappist monastery either by monks or under their supervision, and the brewery must not be a money-making venture – it's merely there to help with monastery upkeep, with anything leftover going to charity. To call your brew an "Abbey Beer" however has no such statute. Abbey beer might be brewed in a non-Trappist monastery, could be brewed by monks or might just use the moniker alongside details of a fictitious monastery or some form of vaguely saintly branding.



HOPSTEINER QUALITY  
THE PROOF IS IN THE POUR™

[WWW.HOPSTEINER.COM](http://WWW.HOPSTEINER.COM)

#### Our Distributors in Africa

##### bevPlus Pty (Ltd): South Africa Distributors

13 Michigan Street, Airport Industria, Cape Town, South Africa 7490  
+ 27 (021) 820 9500 | [info@bevplus.com](mailto:info@bevplus.com) | [www.bevplus.com](http://www.bevplus.com)

##### Dematech Pty (Ltd): Africa Distributors

+ 27 (021) 385 0483 | [info@dematechsa.com](mailto:info@dematechsa.com)

**bevPLUS**  
BEVERAGE INNOVATIONS

**DEMATECH**  
beverage industry experts

  
**Hopsteiner**®

