

LV Style Guides: Witbier

Beer styles don't stick around forever. Many a beautiful beverage has perished at the powerful hands of regulation, competition, and disinterest. Yes...it IS tragic. Thankfully, many dead beer styles of days past have been revived and revitalized by modern brewers in recent years. Old beer is super cool right now. Berliner weisse, gose, grodziskie, and Lichtenhainer are all likely to make an appearance at your local brewpub these days. But before those were the hip old beers to brew, there was witbier. It's a wicked old style, indeed, but 50 years ago, it was almost entirely extinct. Now, it's darn near everywhere, thanks to a single man from Belgium...

Some Background

It's true. Witbier is an old, old beer style. Its roots extend to the Middle Ages, as a part of the monastic brewing history of what is now eastern Belgium. There, the style enjoyed a few hundred years of popularity, becoming a specialty of the little town of Hoegaarden.

But remember—beer styles don't stick around forever. Drinkers gradually began to lose interest in witbier, favoring the clear and hoppy styles that were sweeping Europe in the 19th century. Witbier was cloudy from the unmalted wheat used to make it and flavored with coriander and other spices. Hops didn't play as big a role as they did in pilsner or other popular styles of the time.

By the mid-20th century, the style was basically extinct. There were precisely zero Belgian breweries producing it. A man named Pierre Celis didn't like that. As a native of witbier-soaked Hoegaarden, Pierre did not want to see his town's regional specialty disappear. So he made it himself. He started his own brewery and created his own witbier, to be named after his hometown. You may have heard of it.

Yep, Hoegaarden has found itself a sizeable chunk of success. Sadly, it isn't an entirely happy story. In 1985, Celis' uninsured brewery burned down, which led to its eventual sale to the company that is now known as Anheuser-Busch InBev. Since the acquisition, the beer has never been the same.

Celis did his best to keep the original Hoegaarden recipe alive before he died in 2011. He started the Celis Brewery in Austin, Texas to produce it stateside under the name Celis White. It hasn't fared quite as well as Hoegaarden, but Pierre's legacy lives on in every witbier made with care today.

The Style Today

As time has worn on, witbier has stayed delightfully true to its roots. Every glass is a drinkable tribute to the witbiers that have existed for centuries, and the beers made now are more delicious and consistent now than they ever have been.

They are still made with 30-50% unmalted wheat (the remainder typically being malted barley), which lends the beer its namesake white color (witbier means "white beer" in Dutch), cloudiness, and distinct malt flavor profile.

Witbiers are usually spiced with coriander and orange peel, a callback to the beer's early days from a time that predated the exclusive use of hops as a flavoring agent. The beers don't have a ton of hop bitterness, driven in flavor instead by a wheaty tang, yeasty spiciness, and prominent but well-integrated flavors of the spices used in the beer's production.

These are drinkable beers that typically weigh in around 4.5-6% ABV. Perfect with vinaigrette-dressed salads and classic with steamed mussels, they are incredibly versatile food beers that have a place alongside sushi, ceviche, Thai food, and not-too-sweet fruit-based desserts. If it's hot out, they're almost unbeatably refreshing on their own.

Cheers! Raise one to Mr. Celis!