

Pilsen, birthplace of beer

Biggest brewery in Czech Republic shares its heritage with the world

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What a sad day it must have been for beer lovers in Bohemia. A crowd watched 36 barrels of beer — bad beer — ceremoniously dumped in the street outside the Town Hall.

From this low point in 1838, brewers in Pilsen rallied, upped their brewery game and gave their town's name

travel

to a new kind of brew now enjoyed across the globe.

The first batch of pilsner, the model for what more than two-thirds of the world calls beer, came from this town 50 miles southwest of Prague. Beer lovers make pilgrimages here to tour the Czech Republic's largest brewery, Pilsner Urquell, where they descend into damp cellars to drink unfiltered, unpasteurized lager straight from the barrel. At Pilsen's Brewery Museum they fill up on the history of beer making. Some even venture to the suburbs for a full-body experience, soaking in a beer bath at a beer spa.

The roots of brew

The story of beer in Pilsen — Plzen in Czech — goes back to its founding in 1295 by King Wenceslaus II who granted 260 citizens the right to brew beer in their homes. When a batch finished, a bell summoned townspeople to drink. Quality varied wildly. Medieval brewers had odd notions about what makes good beer. Some added duck excrement to the brew, others the bones of executed criminals.

Such bits of trivia await visitors to Pilsen's Brewery Museum housed in a 15th-century brewing house nestled against remnants of the city's medieval ramparts. Hops and barley grow in a garden. Inside, exhibits tell the story of beer starting in 4000 B.C. Mesopotamia, show the brewing process in medieval times and take visitors past a re-creation of an 18th-century pub where angst-ridden novelist



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Copper brew kettles in the Pilsner Urquell Brewery are now just for show. More modern brew kettles are used today, but the recipe and ingredients go back to the 19th century.

Franz Kafka would one day stare glumly into a mug.

The museum also recalls the 1838 incident when Pilsen's town councilors determined much of the local brew posed a health risk and tossed it. A group of brewers pooled resources to build a commercial brewery and hired well-known Bavarian brew master Josef Groll. His first batch came out in October 1842, a light, bottom-fermented lager that came to be known as pilsner, a style of beer that today accounts for 70 percent of all consumed on earth.

In the museum's cozy 1930s-style Na Parkanu Taproom patrons wash down traditional Czech fare with a rare glass of cloudy, unfiltered Pilsner Urquell or the finished clear amber draft.

Soaking up beer

They also find the beers on tap at the biggest beer hall

Pilsen, Czech Republic

Pilsen Tourism: pilsen.eu/en/tourist/

Czech Tourism: czechtourism.com/home/

Pilsner Urquell Brewery tours and Pilsen's Brewery Museum: prazdrojvisit.cz/en/

Purkmistr beer spa, hotel and brewery: purkmistr.cz/en_index.php

in Bohemia, the 550-capacity Na Spilce on the grounds of the Pilsner Urquell brewery nearby.

The modern brewery uses the same recipes and ingredients as Pilsen's 1842 incarnation, but has grown to slake the thirsts of beer lovers in 50 countries. With the exception of its brewery in Russia serving the local market, all Pilsner Urquell distributed around the world comes from this brewery complex 15 minutes from Pilsen's city center. The brewery makes four other brands, including Gambrinus, top seller in the Czech Republic.

Tours begin in the visitor center where the story of the first pilsner unfolds. In the courtyard a circa 1900 railcar that made regular beer runs to Vienna stands permanently parked near a horse-drawn wagon that, for the sake of tradition, still delivers beer to Pilsen pubs.

Twelve copper kettles gleam in the brew house where a film explains the process of triple mashing — most beers are mashed once or twice — and lagering, aging the beer for 30 days. After a look at the original 1842 brew kettle, buried to keep from enemy hands during World War I and II, visitors head down to the brewery's 5.6 miles of

cellars. In temperatures hovering at 39 degrees, oak barrels made by Pilsner Urquell's own coopers hold lager that has yet to be filtered and pasteurized. Spigots turn and anyone of legal age gets a taste.

Twenty minutes outside Pilsen, guests immerse themselves in beer at Purkmistr, a rural farmhouse containing a microbrewery, rustic restaurant, 32-room hotel, bowling alley and spa. In addition to facilities for traditional body treatments, the spa has one double and four single wooden bathtubs for soaking. Its classic beer bath consists of the brewery's own beer combined with wort, yeast and other



COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Hops grow in a small garden outside Pilsen's Brewery Museum built along the ruins of the Czech Republic town's medieval ramparts.



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Pilsen's Brewery Museum occupies a 15th-century house a short walk from the Pilsner Urquell Brewery complex.

ingredients. A keg stands within reach for those who want to imbibe while they bathe.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Czech Tourism.*