

## BRAZILIAN BEERS: BLOND IS BEAUTIFUL, DARK IS DREADFUL. AN EXPERT'S VIEW

The beer market is most dynamic in South America. Growth has been tremendous since the beginning of the eighties leading to a per-capita consumption of some 37 litres in 1990. As opposed to a recent consumption drop in Central America, South Americans now drink over 50 litres per head. Markets have become more competitively oriented, imports have increased, new breweries have been built in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Columbia, Venezuela and Paraguay. It is expected that beer consumption in South America will grow by up to 50% by the year 2001. This means that the region would surpass all others worldwide in terms of dynamics.

### Brazil, a Major Beer Country

The upward trend caught the eyes of major players in the world, and large international brewing groups, such as Anheuser-Busch and Miller from the United States, Heineken from The Netherlands and Carlsberg from Denmark, are actively participating in the Brazilian brewing sector. As a result, modernization of the breweries has been accelerated by injection of foreign capital, either through acquisition of shares or through establishment of joint ventures.

Brazil currently accounts for about 40% of the total beer market in South America. This prosperity is highlighted, not only by an average consumption of ca. 55 litres per head, but certainly by the 4th position occupied by Brazil in the list of major beer-producing countries, trailed only behind the United States, China and Germany. More than two thirds of the total beer production in Brazil are accounted for by the two major beer-brewing companies, Brahma and Antarctica. It is estimated - and this may seem a surprising fact - that the consumption of pure alcohol in the form of beer in Brazil equals that consumed by drinking cachaça.

### Lager versus Special Beers

The Brazilian beer market is heavily focussed on blond lager beers ('chopp'). This may be partly attributed to the dominating position of few large breweries, giving them a significant competitive edge over smaller competitors regarding marketing and distribution in a giant country. Lager beer is a mass-product and large-volume production capacities are amply available. On the other hand, the lager beer style must appeal to the majority of drinkers that desire a lighter flavour, more refreshing drink in the warm climate reigning the country.

It is assumed that special beers represent less than 5% of the total consumption in Brazil. Efforts are being done to create a high-end niche market for dark-coloured, stronger beers that should please a rising class of beer aficionados. But what a shock the tasting of some dark beers was for a gringo, who happens to be a beer connoisseur familiar to a whole spectrum of special beers! After all, the promotion slogan 'Belgium, beer paradise of the world', has firm foundations. In this small country (one sixth of the surface of the Sao Paulo State), more than 1000 special beers are brewed in some 100 small-sized breweries, which almost exclusively deliver such high-quality top-fermented

beers. Since brewers produce only small volumes for a very restricted market (about 10 million people), they can fully devote their craftsmanship to make unique products, based on brewing traditions handed over by generations of family brewers. It is not surprising, therefore, that ca. 300 different Belgian beer flavours can be discerned by trained taste panels.

### Unbalanced Dark Beers

Both, traditions and small breweries are lacking in Brazil, hence the brewing of special beers is inevitably in the hands of big brewing companies that are specialized in lager beers, and only in lager beers. The first striking observation is the extreme dark colour of most special Brazilian beers, from which an expert readily deduces that either dark-coloured (so called Munich-type) barley malts were used, or strongly caramelized sugar syrups. Sure enough, the expectations were fully met when tasting some of these turbid dark beers.

Sweeping through the *Malzbier*, *Niger* and *Caracu* beers (all from Antarctica) gave organoleptic impressions that can not possibly please beer lovers. A very sweet taste (*Malzbier*) contrasted inappropriately to an unpleasant burnt flavour (*Niger*), whereas the very likely addition of caramel syrup was undoubtedly aimed at masking partially this burnt character in *Caracu*. *Schincariol Munich* exhibited a more neutral taste profile with respect to sweetness and bitterness, yet an obnoxious oxidized after-taste made the beer undrinkable. This bottle was definitely too old, as confirmed by a lack of foam, and pouring such liquid in the sink does not need an excuse. Similar critical comments could be formulated for *Serramalte Extra* and *Boemia*. The best beer in the series, although far from perfect, was *Antarctica München Extra*. A distinct malty flavour overwhelmed both the nose and the tongue, but, following the first sips, a sticky caramel taste became apparent. Finally, a very bitter, lingering after-taste underpinned the conviction of the critical reviewer being confronted with totally unbalanced beers.

### Towards High-Quality Dark Beers

Brazilian brewers have a long way to go before a mature public will be ready to accept new beer types and tastes. A few suggestions may be helpful towards reaching this goal. The organoleptic features of an excellent special beer should be an interplay of hints of a malty flavour derived from barley, a pleasant bitterness from hops and a rich bouquet of volatiles formed by top-fermenting yeasts, in close association and in synergy with a rather high alcohol content. Particularly, the contributions of barley malt are quite subtle. On one hand, brewers need dark malts to colour their beers, on the other hand excessive use thereof leads to an annoying burnt flavour. It is common practice to add caramels or sugar syrups, but, as a result, the organoleptic pendulum swings to a much too pronounced sweetness. Experience is needed to find a proper balance between these two extremes. Additionally, a delicate hoppy flavour should be aligned along this prerequisite, but hopping proved to be too weak in Brazilian beers. Those beers are clearly defective in hoppy flavour and miss the character of a full-bodied beverage. None of the beers tested were balanced in an organoleptic sense and, consequently, appreciation by consumers should remain very doubtful.

A crucial, and often overlooked, influence is exerted by

alcohol. It is very well known that alcohol, if present above certain levels, envelops and enhances various beer flavours. The medium alcohol content in special Brazilian beers, between 4% and 5.5%, is insufficient for full exploitation of all inherent organoleptic features. As a comparison, the best Belgian special beers are characterized by alcohol levels varying between 6.5% and 10.5%. Evidently, such high alcohol contents may cause undesired effects and consumers should be aware of this.

Current prospects for consumption of dark beers in Brazil may be linked to seasonal preferences, for example drinking of bock beers during the winter period. Improvement of the quality and fine-tuning of flavours could open a much wider niche, with respect both to target public and to year-round impact. It is now

commonplace to advocate that a female public shows increased preferences for dark beers. But why should men not discover some indulgence to special beers? If they like blondes, there are excellent candidates to choose from. As the Brazilian beer scene presents itself to date, it is, however, not an expression of good taste to opt for dark types. Hello, Brazilian brewers?

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