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The German Reinheitsgebot

- why it's a load of old bollocks

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Introduction

The Reinheitsgebot, the oldest consumer protection law and a guarantee of beer quality. An example to the world of how beer should be brewed, as the Germans have done for centuries. Well, not really. These are a few of the myths I would like to expose. Everyone *thinks* that they know what the Reinheitsgebot is and mostly consider that's it's pretty groovy. This is an attempt to have an objective look at what can be a very emotive subject.

Now, some people may be a little shocked and perhaps even outraged by the title of this page so a few words of explanation first. German beer, generally, is brewed to a very high standard, one which of the rest of the world rightly envies. Unfortunately, many people seem to get confused about the reasons for the high quality of German beer. As far as I can tell, the Reinheitsgebot is totally irrelevant; German beer is good because German brewers are highly skilled and make their beer with pride and care.

The DDR - who needs a Reinheitsgebot?

That it is also possible to do this without the limitation of only using malt, water, hops and yeast has been proved by many, including some in Germany itself. The scorn heaped upon beer from the DDR - mostly because of the supposedly inferior brewing standards - I find totally unjust and mostly based upon pure prejudice. How many West Germans, who will happily tell you how undrinkable DDR beer was while sipping a delicious glass of Oettinger, ever actually drank in an East German pub? Very few.



I can well remember being in the DDR at the time when West German beer first became available. What surprised me were how much *worse* the imported beers were than the supposedly inferior DDR counterparts. I couldn't understand how anyone could prefer these expensive, tasteless beers over their own local, flavourful brews. Well, as time has shown, they didn't. Even before the reintroduction of the Reinheitsgebot in the East, people had gone back to their old favourites. Anyone who compared the washing-up water blandness of Eschwege Pils with the wonderful Mühlhausener Pilsator would know why: the DDR beer simply tasted better.



What is pure?

I realise that this is a controversial view because many, including some who really should know better are hypnotised by the 'pure' beer argument and find it hard to believe that beer with other ingredients can not only be just as pure, but also taste just as good. A crap, money-grubbing commercial brewery will manage to brew bland rubbish either within or without the constraints of the Reinheitsgebot. The problem is, that concentration on this limited list of ingredients as the core of beer quality allows compromise in many other key areas.

For me, the discussion should concentrate more around the factors which are truly crucial to the taste of a beer: the quality of the ingredients, lagering times, pasteurisation, filtration and carbonation. I think it has been all too easy for many

German breweries, and not only the large ones, to gloss over the introduction of dubious techniques by insisting that they still brewed 'pure' beer.

Sorry, but I'm afraid that I find it hard to accept that a filtered, pasteurised beer, given a quick glance at the cellar and then shipped out to the unwitting or uncaring customer is a 'pure' beer, solely because only malt was in the grist. I'm not advocating huge amounts of adjuncts in the mash tun, but I know that while I may not be able to notice if a beer contains 5% non-malt in the grist, I can certainly tell if it hasn't been lagered long enough. For me this is the only thing that matters; how does it taste.

As long as it tastes good and doesn't have anything harmful in it, the brewers should be allowed to use whatever ingredients they choose. You only have to look at Belgium to see how far the frontiers of what is considered beer can be pushed back. The simple insistence that all their beer is good because it is 'pure' has been very convenient for any German brewer wanting to cut corners, lower production costs, but still maintain that they are providing a top-quality product.

How good is German beer?

Let's be honest about this; there's lots of crap beer brewed in Germany. There is also a large amount of very good beer produced, but to insist that all German beer is good is evidently ridiculous. Not all British beer is good, not all Belgian beer is good, not even all Czech beer is good.

From the caramelly, boiled-sweet flavour of a mass-produced alt through a soapy, sweetish helles to a one-dimensional pils that tastes like lemonade with added hop-extract, there are plenty of uninspired or downright unpleasant beers.

On the other hand, the pub-brewed altbiers of Düsseldorf as some of the finest examples of top-fermented beers to be found anywhere in the world. A Franconian unfiltered kellerbier is a revelation to anyone thinking that bottom-fermented beers could never rival ales for subtlety and complexity of flavour. A Bavarian weizen, with its bouquet of spices - coriander, cloves, banana even - can confound the limitations of its ingredients and achieve flavours straight from the spice mill. There is much diversity and much to be very proud of in the German brewing world.



11 Reasons why the Reinheitsgebot is bollocks

With that explanation/apology done, here are my reasons why the Reinheitsgebot is a load of old bollocks:

1. No-one in the world brews according to the Reinheitsgebot of 1516.

Everyone (with the exception of the lambic brewers who disqualify themselves on other grounds) uses yeast as well as the water, malt (and that's specifically and exclusively *barley* malt). Even if you don't deliberately add it, you'll find it pretty difficult to brew beer without yeast.

2. It's a bread protection rather than beer protection law. The original idea in limiting the permissible ingredients of beer, was to stop people using grain better suited to making bread for making beer. Specifically, rye and wheat. Barley, not so suitable for baking but very much so for brewing, was to be reserved for beer. No wheat beer can claim to be brewed to the Reinheitsgebot of 1516, because until the 17th Century when the aristocracy were given the privilege of brewing beer with wheat (the equivalent of eating white bread), the use of wheat in brewing was specifically forbidden in Bavaria. In the original law only barley malt is permitted.

3. The only permitted ingredients are malt, water, hops and yeast. . . .except for sugar in top-fermenting beers. Exactly why this is allowed in top-fermenting beers and forbidden in bottom-fermenting beers is a riddle to me. You will note that German brewers don't advertise the fact that sugar is sometimes allowed in their beers.

4. In itself, it's no guarantee of good beer. Let's face it, Heineken Pils is brewed according to it. Are you seriously accusing that of being a top-quality beer? Or try that delicious Binding beer. Umm, dishwasher with a dash or margarine. Lovely.

5. There are still chemical additives used in German beer. It's perfectly permissible to treat the water with chemicals before you use it. Plus all the pesticides and chemical fertilisers you like in growing the barley. Some German brewers got most upset with people brewing organic beer, because they saw it as a challenge to their claim to purity.

6. It limits the styles of beer which are possible. Virtually none of the classic Belgian ales is, or even *can* be brewed if you stick to the rules of the Reinheitsgebot. Framboos and kriel because of the use of fruit (hardly a cheap replacement for malt), La Chouffe and witbiers because of their use of spices. None of these would be possible. Given the choice between Heineken Pils and La Chouffe, I know which I would go for.

Considering the number of breweries it possesses, Germany is home to relatively few beer styles. Bavaria, with its hundreds of breweries only has a handful of different styles. Belgium, on the other hand, with it's open-minded approach to ingredients, has almost as many styles as breweries. Even Austria, with only 90-odd breweries, manages to have at least as many different types of beer as the whole of Germany.

7. Germans have been brewing to the Reinheitsgebot since 1516. Well, Bavarians have. But then again, not even all of them. In 1516 Bavaria was a good deal smaller than it is now, and didn't yet include that not-really-so-important brewing area of Frankenland, where getting on for 50% of all the breweries still active in Bavaria are located. Nuremberg, Bamberg and Bayreuth became Bavarian in 1803, as part of the fallout of the [Napoleonic Wars](#).

The Reinheitsgebot was only extended to cover the whole of Germany in 1906 (though it was adopted earlier in the South - Baden 1896, Württemberg 1900). It

was a prerequisite for the Bavarians in agreeing to German unification. It was vigorously opposed by North German brewers who (quite rightly) saw it as an attempt by the Bavarians to protect their trade. Its introduction to the whole country saw the extinction of certain **beer styles** (there had been a tradition of spiced beers, probably dating back to before the time when hops were widely used), as happened again in the 1990's when one version of Köstritzer Schwarzbier could no longer be produced.

8. It doesn't act as any protection for the consumer. It's still perfectly possible to produce dreadfully impure beer, with a yeast or bacterial infection, and sell it. I have drunk beer in Germany which was so badly infected that it was unfit to have left the brewery. The Reinheitsgebot has nothing to say about this. Real consumer protection legislation would insist that beer was fit to drink.

9. The current Reinheitsgebot is not the same as that of 1516. The original law says that beer should only be made from *barley*, hops and water. Note that this is not barley malt, but barley, which is specified. Of course, no mention of any other form of malt or grain, such as wheat. Guinness, which doesn't count as a Reinheitsgebot beer because of the use of roasted barley *would* have qualified under the 1516 rules.

10. German brewers do not always stick to the Reinheitsgebot themselves. Many breweries use various adjuncts for versions of their beers sold abroad. (Though this is not allowed for those located in Bavaria.)

11. Many German wheat beers may not, strictly speaking, be sticking to the rules of the Reinheitsgebot. Wheat malt is only permitted as an ingredient in top-fermented beers, yet many hefeweizen beers are bottled with a bottom-fermenting yeast. As this yeast will be continuing the fermentation in the bottle, it's a matter of debate whether the end result is a pure top-fermenting beer.

Some misguided people, without thinking of the consequences, had proposed the introduction of the Reinheitsgebot for the whole of the EEC. What a disaster this would be for diversity and choice for the beer drinker! Belgian fruit and spiced beers, Finnish sahti, even traditional Guinness, would no longer be possible.

What is really needed is legislation forcing brewers to list the ingredients on the label (as is already the case in Scandinavia). Then consumers can see what they are getting and make an informed choice. Personally, I don't want to have my choice of beer determined by medieval legislation to stop Bavarian peasants malting grain they should have been baking with.

The Reinheitsgebot today

Here is an English translation of the German beer law. Note paragraph 2 where the permitted ingredients for top-fermented beer are listed. Note also paragraph 7 and its reference to "special beers". This can allow pretty well any ingredients, on a purely discretionary basis. It is this part of the law that allows Gose to be brewed with coriander and salt yet still be called beer.

German Beer Law

1. Only barley malt, hops, yeast and water may be used for the brewing of bottom-fermented beer, with the exceptions contained in the regulations in paragraphs 4 to 6.
2. The brewing of top-fermenting beer underlies the same regulations, however

other malts may be used and the use of technically pure cane, beet or invert sugars as well as dextrose and colouring agents derived from these sugars is allowed.

3. Malt shall be taken to mean: any grain that has been caused to germinate.
4. The use of colouring beers, if brewed from malt, hops, yeast and water, in the preparation of beer is allowed but is subject to special supervisory measures.
5. Hop powder, hops in other milled forms and hop extracts may be used in brewing, so long as these products comply with the following requirements:
 1. Hop powder and other milled hop forms, as well as hop extracts must be produced exclusively from hops.
 2. Hop extracts must:
 1. contribute the same flavouring and bittering substances to the wort as would have been contributed had hops been simmered with the wort.
 2. fulfil the requirements of the German Pure Food Laws.
 3. only be added to the wort before or during the simmering phase.
6. Only materials which act mechanically or by absorption and are thereafter removable, leaving no, or only such residue in the beer which is of no health, taste or odour concern may be used to clarify beer.
7. Upon request, in individual cases, such as the preparation special beers and beers intended for export or scientific experiments, exceptions to the requirements of paragraphs 1 and 2 can be made.
8. The requirements of paragraphs 1 and 2 are not applicable to brewing for personal consumption (home brewing).
9. After establishing the original extract content in the fermenting room, water may not be added to beer without permission of the customs office. The customs office can permit the brewer to add water to beer after the original extract content has been established in the fermenting room, provided the appropriate precautionary measures have been observed. Beer wholesalers or publicans are, under no circumstances, allowed to add water to beer.
10. Brewers, beer wholesalers or publicans are not allowed to mix beers of different original extract contents nor to add sugar to beer after the beer tax has been calculated. The Finance Minister can allow exceptions by decree.
11. For the production of top-fermenting simple or very low original extract content beer, according to the Additive Authorisation Regulation (...)

For those of you who can read German, here is the text in German. Note the much longer list of ingredients in paragraph 2 where what is allowed for top-fermented beer is listed.

Deutschen Biersteuergesetz

1. Zur Bereitung von untergäurigem Bier darf, abgesehen von den Vorschriften in den Absätzen 4 bis 6, nur Gestenmalz, Hopfen, Hefe und Wasser verwendet werden.
2. Die Bereitung von obergäurigem Bier unterliegt derselben Vorschrift; es ist hierbei jedoch auch die Verwendung von anderem Malz und die Verwendung von technisch reinem Rohr- Rüben- oder Invertzucker sowie von Stärkezucker und aus Zucker der bezeichneten Art hergestellten Farbmitteln zulässig.
3. Unter Malz wird alles künstlich zum Keimen gebrachte Getreide verstanden.
4. Die Verwendung von Farbebieren, die nur aus Malz, Hopfen, Hefe und Wasser hergestellt sind, ist bei der Bierbereitung gestattet, unterliegt jedoch besonderen Überwachungsmaßnahmen.
5. An Stelle von Hopfen dürfen bei der Bierbereitung auch Hopfenpulver oder Hopfen in anderweit zerkleinerter Form oder Hopfenauszüge verwendet werden, sofern diese Erzeugnisse den nachstehenden Anforderungen

entsprechen:

1. Hopfenpulver und anderweit zerkleinerter Hopfen sowie Hopfenauszüge müssen ausschließlich aus Hopfen gewonnen sein.
2. Hopfenauszüge müssen
 1. die beim Sudverfahren in die Bierwürze übergehenden Stoffe des Hopfens oder dessen Aroma- und Bitterstoffe in einer Beschaffenheit enthalten, wie sie Hopfen vor oder bei dem Kochen in der Bierwürze aufweist.
 2. Den Vorschriften des Lebensmittelrechts entsprechen. Die Hopfenauszüge dürfen der Bierwürze nur vor Beginn oder während der Dauer des Würzekochens beigegeben werden.
6. Als Klärmittel für Würze und Bier dürfen nur solche Stoffe verwendet werden, die mechanisch oder absorbierend wirken und bis auf gesundheitlich, geruchlich und geschmacklich unbedenkliche, technisch unvermeidbare Anteile wieder ausgeschieden werden.
7. Auf Antrag kann im einzelnen Fall zugelassen werden, daß bei der Bereitung von besonderen Bieren und von Bier, das zur Ausfuhr oder zu wissenschaftlichen Versuchen bestimmt ist, von den Absätzen 1 und 2 abgewichen wird.
8. Die Vorschriften in den Absätzen 1 und 2 finden keinerlei Verwendung für diejenigen Brauereien, die Bier nur für den Hausgebrauch herstellen (Hausbrauer)
9. Der Zusatz von Wasser zum Bier durch Brauer nach Feststellung des Extraktgehaltes der Stammwürze im Gärkeller oder durch Bierhändler oder durch Wirte ist untersagt. Das Hauptzollamt kann Brauern unter den erforderlichen Sicherungsmaßnahmen den Zusatz von Wasser zum Bier nach Feststellung des Extraktgehaltes der Stammwürze im Gärkeller gestatten.
10. Die Vermischung von Einfachbier, Schankbier, Vollbier und Starkbier miteinander sowie der Zusatz von Zucker zum Bier nach Entstehung der Steuer oder durch Bierhändler oder Wirte ist untersagt. Der Bundesminister für Finanzen kann Ausnahmen erlassen.
11. Zur Herstellung von obergäurigem Einfachbier kann nach Maßgabe der Zusatzstoff-Zulassungsverordnung [...]

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