

INDUSTRY ARTICLE

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Craft Beer in Berlin

The craft beer landscape is constantly changing, so it's worth taking a closer look every now and then to stay on top of developments. Beer expert Sylvia Kopp has been doing some research in her home city of Berlin, and she now introduces us to some old stagers, new faces and hip trends from the capital's craft beer scene.

Beer experiences come in all shapes and sizes in the capital. Brauhaus Lemke am Alex offers a modern take on the rustic style: Oli Lemke inspires his international clientele with beers in the Fireside Parlour, the Hunting Room and the Barrel Lounge. A sophisticated bar with its own brewery and a large selection of home-brews: the Straßenbräu in Friedrichshain is straightforward and stylish. And the Brlo-Brwhouse at Gleisdreieck is characteristic of the capital's urban beer feeling: it boasts a container brewery, creative upscale cuisine and a beer garden by the park with a view of the elevated subway tracks.

From Stone Brewing to Brewdog

One of Germany's most beautiful beer gardens is Brewdog's Dogtap at the former gas works in Berlin-Mariendorf – with deciduous trees, stone beds and paved paths leading to tables on airy levels and in secluded niches, as originally created in the Stone Brewing days.

The switch from the Californians, who opened the Mariendorf brewery with a restaurant and beer garden in 2014, to the Scottish multinational brewery and catering group Brewdog, which took over the site a year ago, represents the change from an exclusive beer experience to a more familiar and popular one. From craft beer splendour to beer garden punk. Inside, the difference is striking: the once stylish restaurant and lounge areas have given way to a two-dimensional hall ambience with table football and shuffleboard; instead

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Private Brauereien Bayern e.V.
Thomas-Wimmer-Ring 9
80539 München
Germany

Veranstalter

Organizer

NürnbergMesse GmbH
Messezentrum
90471 Nürnberg
Germany
T +49 9 11 86 06-0
F +49 9 11 86 06-82 28
braubeviiale@nuernbergmesse.de
www.braubeviiale.de

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of the elegant bar under the gallery, there is now a blue container in the middle, with the counter surrounding it. The fancy cross-over cuisine has been replaced by international bar food. The extreme-hopped 'Arrogant Bastard' has had to yield to the balanced 'Punk IPA'.

This new mainstream appeal may be good for the Mariendorf brewery, as the former gas works rarely attracted enough guests during the Stone years due to its inconvenient location. However, Berlin and Germany have lost a real treasure of beer culture with the withdrawal of the Americans.

New decade – new momentum

So the end of the Stone also marked the end of the era of uncompromising pioneers in the Berlin beer scene. In the same year, the Bierfabrik in Marzahn and Brewbaker in Moabit closed their doors, and Alexander Himburg of Braukunstkeller left the city.

That was back in 2019, the disillusion of that time feels like an eternity ago. In 2020, the capital's beer scene has taken on a new lease of life: genius and madness are out, strategy and business acumen are in. A number of new entrepreneurs are investing to secure a place in the city.

Take the Berliner Berg Brauerei, for example: founded in 2015, until recently the Neukölln outfit was brewing its core assortment at the Schlossbrauerei Hohentann in Lower Bavaria. They only used their own 500-litre facility in the backyard on Kopfstrasse for special brews such as sour beer and cask-stored beer. But contract and small-scale brewing are now a thing of the past. The ground-breaking ceremony for the new 600-square-meter hall on Treptower Strasse, not far from Treptower Park, was held at the end of June. A 30-hectolitre brewhouse will be built here, initially only with barrel filling but later also with bottle filling.

Berliner Berg: establishing its own inner-city brewery thanks to new partners

“Having our own inner-city brewery was always our goal,” says Michéle Hengst, managing director and co-partner at Berliner Berg. Since joining the company in 2016, she has been developing and implementing the plans for this with her partners Robin Weber and Uli Erxleben. At BrauBeviale 2018, master brewer Torsten Vullriede finally received the quotations for a new brewing plant. And at BrauBeviale 2019, the Berliners signed the purchase contract for a mash and lauter tun, wort kettle, and whirlpool with pre-cooler and ‘natural hop giver’ at the stand of the Thuringian manufacturer ABN.

Berliner Berg is financing the €2-million investment with loans, municipal support and two new shareholders. In Florian Rehm, Jägermeister’s main shareholder, and Mirco Wolf Wiegert, founder and owner of Fritz Cola, two big names in the beverage industry are joining the company with minimum stakes. “It’s a great honour for us that two such successful entrepreneurs have placed their trust in us,” says Michéle Hengst. A fruitful exchange on marketing and sales issues has already begun with the new partners. Berliner Berg is keen to be a ‘connective brewery’ that builds a bridge between traditional beers and craft beer, and that attracts the ‘normal beer drinker’. According to Hengst, tradition doesn’t always have to mean a Berliner Weiße. “Berlin is a pilsner city,” she says. Her new beer, brewed with hop cones, bravely sets out to compete with the well-known TV brands at the taps and on supermarket shelves. There is also a plan to open a visitors’ reception on Treptower Strasse, but that will not happen this year.

Former light bulb factory in Wedding is Vagabund’s new home

Tap room forever or expand? That was the decision faced by Matt Wallthall, Tom Crozier and David Spengler – the founders of the Vagabund Brewery in Wedding – around four years ago. After suffering a second slipped disc, Matt knew that he would not be able to continue brewing on the tiny 220-litre system forever. In terms of space, the small brew pub on Antwerpener Strasse, opened in 2013, had long since reached its limits.

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Matt explains, “I needed a new challenge, a new project.” So he drafted business plans, submitted lengthy funding applications, and persuaded new shareholders, banks and the operators of the Osram factories that the venture was viable. And indeed, they gave Vagabund the go-ahead to use the former light bulb factory built in the 19th century – complete with two chimneys that will, from 2020 onwards, be the landmark for craft beer produced in Wedding!

The ground floor, which has a cozy ceiling height of two metres, will house the restaurant. Then the spacious, brightly lit hall on the upper floor will accommodate a 30-hl gem by Kaspar Schulz, plus another two 60-hl and four 90-hl tanks to start with – as well as a room for private events. The floor is currently being cast and the walls plastered. Vagabund expects to open a bar in the courtyard in August. With a pale ale, session IPA, ESB and a gose, they also have their eye on the retail trade.

Experimental beers will always be available here, says Matt: the craft brewer code demands it. But he particularly enjoys reaching consumers outside the craft beer bubble with compatible varieties

Fuerst Wiacek: experimental approaches from Spandau

Up-and-coming German brewers Lukasz Wiacek and Georg Fürst of Fuerst Wiacek were also on a shopping spree at the BrauBeviale in Nuremberg. They have been brewing their beers at Brlo Craft Zentrum Spandau for two years now. Two varieties a week, according to the plan for 2020: all special brews, but with the occasional repetition. Juicy & hazy, fruity sour beers, complex stouts. “Contract brewing is expensive,” says Lukasz, “and only elaborate creations pay off.” They would have more scope for lighter varieties in their own brewery. That is something they are on track to achieve this year: Fuerst Wiacek has signed a lease on a 1,200-square-metre hall in Siemensstadt in Spandau, and has ordered a 25-hl system from Krones/Steinecker – a three-appliance brewhouse that can be expanded to five units. The annual capacity is 30,000 hectolitres. “Our target is 5,000 to 8,000 hectolitres,” says Wiacek confidently. The demand is there, he says. 80 percent of their production is

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sold to other European countries, 20 percent in Germany. Since they started selling their beer in cans, domestic sales have finally been growing. The new brewery is intended as a pure production facility. “We will focus on exports sales first and see whether the demand for a bar develops,” says Wiacek.

Double-digit growth for Brewdog

The new decade promises to be a great one for beer in the capital. And the kettles are also getting into gear at the Berlin Brewdog brewery. Starting in July, its headliners ‘Punk IPA’, ‘Brewdog Pale Ale’, ‘Elvis Juice’, ‘Kiez Keule’ and ‘Zwickel Helles’ will be brewed using the 100-hl Steinecker system. Brewmaster Production Sebastian Feind has carried out numerous flavour matching trials in preparation for that. Now everything fits. The brewery says it is working at full capacity in Scotland. “We’re looking into whether we can help out in Berlin.

But the top priority is to brew beers for Germany,” says Feind. Brewdog is experiencing double-digit growth here, the company claims. Three new restaurants – including brewpubs – will open over the next few weeks, with more to follow. According to Marcus Thieme, CEO Germany, there are some promising projects in the pipeline for Dogtap Berlin. There has been talk of a music festival on the premises – Corona permitting. “Craft beer culture is not only about the beer,” Thieme emphasises. “First you have to create an experience around the brand, then you sell that experience with every bottle.”

With all the beer experiences, both tried-and-tested and future ones, “Beer brewed in Berlin” can become a bestseller and build up enough momentum to break through boundaries – despite the new level-headedness – and generate some genuine craft beer frenzy.

Only BrauBeviale can slow down this new momentum: “Only the absolutely essential is done in the brewery during the week of the event,” says Brlo master brewer Michael Lembke. “We design the production schedule with the trade fair in mind so that as many employees as possible can visit the fair.” Well then, cheers to the capital’s brewers!

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Contact for press and media

Sabine Ziener, Christina Freund

T 49 911 86 06-83 55

F 49 911 86 06-12 83 55

christina.freund@nuernbergmesse.de

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