

Brewing takes time

Beer has always had a special place in Czech life. A spoof notice currently circulating on Czech social media reads: "Please Mr Babiš, let us go to the pub. We promise we'll stay there for the next two weeks." The history of beer was condensed at a recent BCŠA talk.

Edward Peacock

The history of Czech beer was the entertaining talk heard on March 3 by a rapt audience. It followed the BCŠA's AGM in the cinema at the Czech Embassy.

The speaker was Zdeněk Kudr, one of the co-founders of Bohem Brewery in north London and the manager of the Bohemia House restaurant at the Czech and Slovak National House in West Hampstead.

He began his account long before Czechia existed. Beer was (as far as we know) first brewed by the Sumerians (in modern-day Iraq) around 3000 BC. They then exported it to Egypt. "But what on earth did it taste like at the end of its journey," he asked, "after travelling hundreds of miles on foot or by mule or camel in 40°C heat?" From there it found its way to Greece, then Rome, then Europe more widely. It was first heard of in what is now Czechia in the 4th century, brewed by the Boya tribe.

The brewing of beer got a major boost following the decision by a church council in 816 that monasteries should engage in agricultural activities, which included brewing ale and rearing fish in ponds. Fish and ale were fare permitted on Fridays and in Lent, so there was a ready market. Records show Czech nuns

brewing beer in 970 at the Prague Castle monastery, and the oldest brewery that is still operating today started in Břevnov in 993. The first mention of hops being used was in 1052.

A royal decree in the 13th century gave municipalities the lucrative right to brew beer, and 1295 saw brewing start at Plzeň. The aristocrats of Bohemia were a little slow to catch on but started their own brewing activities in 1517. Thus monasteries, towns and nobles were all brewing. The industry suffered much in the Thirty Years War but the Czech appetite for beer meant that it recovered, and by 1825 there were over 1,400 breweries in the Czech lands.

Most production at this time was of ale, which was easier to make, but in 1842 Pilsner Urquell was first made, following the advice of a Bavarian brewer. Brewing schools were set up and the adoption of more scientific methods drove some breweries out of business: in 1900 the number had fallen to 864. World War I had a devastating effect on the industry and in 1918 there were 562 breweries; World War II caused more damage and in 1945 there were just 252.

The industry was taken over by the state after the



"The Czechs are world leaders in beer consumption, we knock back an average of 140 litres each a year. On average men drink 8 beers a week, women 5," says Zdeněk Kudr, right.

Communists seized power in 1948; then there was little investment, and the condition of the industry deteriorated. "But," Zdeněk assured us, "that didn't stop us having fun in pubs!" In 1989 there were 100 breweries left. Consolidation and the cold draught (no pun intended) of the free market led to there being only 48 in 2007.

Now, 97 per cent of production is in the hands of five major breweries. However, there has been an explosion in the number of small ones, coming up with new styles and new ales, and in 2019 there were over 400. There is no Rheinheitsgebot, the strict German brewing law designed to maintain purity, but that does not mean that Czech beer is in any way inferior in quality.

It was clear that Zdeněk was not only an authority on this vital part of Czech culture but one who much enjoyed it.

Na zdraví!



Top: Bohem chief tapster Marek Průša. Above: Bohem Brewery co-founder and head brewer Petr Skoček.

Of the five major Czech brewing groups, Budvar is still state-owned. Bernard is still in private hands. The Asahi Group of Japan now owns Pilsner, Gambrinus, Radegast and Kozel. The North American giant Molson Coors owns Staropramen, and Heineken owns the Starobrn, Krušovice and Zlatopramen brands. Staropramen sold in Britain is brewed under licence at Burton-on-Trent. "But that has a different taste from the Czech Staropramen," Zdeněk told us, "it's made from different water."



A 'paradise' for beer drinkers

Roger Aitken

It's official. The Germans – not unknown for some great beers of their own with their Rheinheitsgebot purity laws in brewing – have come out and labelled the Czech Republic a "Bier-Paradies".

That was the headline that ran in January in the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), one of the largest daily newspapers in Germany with more than a million readers.

Jan Šurán, president of the Czech-Moravian Union of Microbreweries, recently confirmed in London at a beer workshop at the Czech Embassy there were around 450 microbreweries across the Czech Republic at the end of 2018.

Today the market is dominated by several brewing groups, the largest the renowned Pilsner Urquell

Brewery (Plzeňský Prazdroj founded in 1842 which produced the first 'golden' pilsner or lager).

As well as the eponymous Pilsner Urquell (PU) beer, which is owned by Japan's Asahi, it also produces lagers such as Gambrinus, one of the most popular beers in the Czech Republic.

Brewery tours lasting 100 minutes can be arranged. Visitors can learn how to pour a glass of PU in the 'Hladinka' style and follow it by checking out the basement restaurant. (See: www.prazdrojvisit.cz/en)

For its part, this historic brewery (with shiny new bottling plant) produces some 11 million hectolitres of beer annually and sees thousands of filled bottles fly off its state-of-the-art production line at a rate of knots in Plzeň.