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Beer

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To Belgium, they're knights in shining armor

By Greg Kitsock
Wednesday, October 28, 2009

The Washington area has enough knights for a round table.

I'm not talking about armor-clad warriors who sparred with dragons and tested their mettle in jousting tournaments. These are beer knights: honorary members of the Knighthood of the Brewers' Mash Staff, the modern incarnation of a centuries-old beermakers' guild in Belgium.

At its most recent induction ceremony, held last month in Brussels, the organization welcomed Bart Vandaele, owner and head chef at [Belga Cafe](#) on Capitol Hill, and Thor Cheston, general manager of the K Street bistro [Brasserie Beck](#), for their efforts in promoting Belgian beer in the United States.

They join previous inductees Martin Wetten of Wetten Importers in Sterling (knighted in 2002); Dave Alexander (2003), owner of the Brickskeller; and Bill Catron (2004), formerly of Brasserie Beck and the De Vinos wine shop and now with Latis Imports, importer of the famous sour red ale Rodenbach.

The ceremony began with a procession from the Grand Plaza to the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, where in an hour-long service a priest called down the Lord's blessings on the brewing industry by consecrating a cask of beer. "It was just a wooden cask," says Cheston. "I don't know if it was filled with beer. It might have been purely ceremonial."

Cheston, Vandaele and 14 other inductees from several continents then returned to Brussels's City Hall, where brewers in ceremonial black-and-red robes tapped them on the shoulders not with a sword, but with a mash staff: a wooden pole, four or five feet long, that was used to stir the grain in an age before automation.

Afterward, the newly anointed (and, by now, quite thirsty) knights were let loose on the Grand Plaza, where Belgian Beer Weekend -- an annual festival honoring St. Arnold, the patron of brewers -- was getting underway. Marching to and from the cathedral, "we were blessed by the Belgian rain," Vandaele says. But the clouds parted in time for the 6 p.m. kickoff of the beer fest, featuring about 50 of Belgium's 120 breweries.

Vandaele says his first quaff was the international pilsner Stella Artois, Belgium's best-selling brand. It was a politic decision, as Vandaele is brand ambassador for InBev, the



Thor Cheston, left, of Brasserie Beck and Bart Vandaele of Belga Cafe have been inducted as honorary members of the Belgian brewers' guild. They received the medals at a ceremony in Brussels. (James M. Thresher For The Washington Post)

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Leuven-based corporation that acquired Anheuser-Busch last year and markets 200 brands worldwide, including such Belgian staples as Stella, Hoegaarden and Leffe.

Cheston made a beeline for the Trappist tent, where he downed a glass of Westvleteren 8, a copper-colored strong ale from the Abbey of Saint Sixtus in West Flanders, the most strictly cloistered of Belgium's six Trappist breweries. The monks who brew the beer sell it only at the abbey and at a small cafe across the street. "If you tasted it [in the United States], someone brought it over in a suitcase," Vandaele says.

Belgium's breweries produce 600 to 700 beers on a regular basis, by Cheston's estimate, and more than 1,000 including seasonals and special releases. Even if the monks of Saint Sixtus want their brew to remain local, most breweries are happy to export, and some will even tailor beers especially for the American market. Among the 120 brands on Brasserie Beck's beer list is Antigoon, a blond ale with a pronounced hop character unusual for Belgian beers, that the Brouwerij de Musketiers in Ursel makes exclusively for the bar. (Antigoon is named after a mythical giant who terrorized the inhabitants of Antwerp until a Roman soldier lopped off his hands. Presumably, beer knights Vandaele and Cheston will not be called to engage in mortal combat.)

It's a matter of survival. A Maryland-size country with about 10 million people, Belgium relies heavily on foreign drinkers to support its specialty beer industry. "With some breweries, 75 to 80 percent of their entire production gets exported," says Vandaele. The Belgian Embassy here has been an active promoter. Belgium's ambassador to the United States, Jan Matthysen, hosted a seven-course beer dinner at his Foxhall Road residence in July to celebrate Belgian Independence Day. The ambassador dropped by Belga Cafe on Monday for the rollout party for a new beer: Straffe Hendrik from De Halve Maan ("Half Moon") brewery in Bruges, a potent (9 percent alcohol by volume), fruity, amber-colored brew that belongs to a style called a Bruges triple.

It's hardly surprising, then, that a Belgian brewers' guild would want to confer an honorary title on retailers, restaurateurs and importers who do missionary work for Belgium's breweries, most of which are far too small to compete on their own with the Heinekens and Coronas of the world. (Of the top 50 imported beers in the United States, only two hail from Belgium.)

After their VIP reception, Cheston and Vandaele each received a framed certificate written in Latin and a brass medal sporting the coat of arms of the Knighthood of the Brewers' Mash Staff. The medal, Vandaele says, is more than just a souvenir: "Every year, if I return for the festival, I get free beer as long as I wear it around my neck!"

Beer columnist Greg Kitsock can be reached at food@washpost.com.

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