

A thirst for new tastes

Prague's annual beer festival, this year running May 12 - 28, showcases the Czech Republic's booming microbreweries in a laid-back, civilized atmosphere

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When he arrives in Prague for his family's annual May-to-August hiatus from Montreal, Quebec filmmaker Denis Chouinard likes to indulge in one particular passion.

"I go to a beer garden in a huge park in Žižkov near where we live, sit at a long table and have a pint of Pilsner," said Chouinard, who visits every year with his Czech-born wife, Lucie, and their two sons.

Like millions of others who invade the Czech capital every year when the weather gets warm, Chouinard knows the easiest way to quench his thirst is with beer, the country's national drink.

Helped by masses of beer tourists, Czechs drink more brew per capita than people in any other country in the world – 160 litres a year for every man, woman and child. (By comparison, Canadians drink less than half that – 70 litres, on average.)





Most of what's drunk in the Czech Republic is Pilsner-style pale lager made by the country's three industrial brewers: Pilsner Urquell (owned by SABMiller), Staropramen (Anheuser-Busch InBev) and Budvar (Czech government).

But as in Quebec, the past decade has seen the birth of hundreds of microbreweries that not only often make

exceptionally good lagers, but also a range of other styles, from stout to bock to fruit beer.

The explosion of craft beer, as the micros are called, is part of a new awareness, especially among the Czech Republic's increasingly cosmopolitan young people, that beer culture knows no borders.

It also corrects half a century of emphasis on mass production over quality, begun after the Second World War under the communists and continued after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, when breweries were privatized en masse.

The thirst for new tastes is nowhere more evident than at the annual Czech Beer Festival in Prague, the country's biggest beer event. This year's edition – the fourth – starts May 12 and runs through May 28.



"It's special," said Jan Hübner, who runs the festival, which last year attracted well over 100,000 people. "We offer more than 80 brands of Czech beer, from 36 breweries," almost all smaller, regional producers, he said.

When it first started out, the fest featured the big brewers, but

their beers didn't sell well, given that they're so easily available throughout the country. There were lineups for the craft brewers, however - proof that small is beautiful.

"People coming here want to try new kinds of beer," Hübner said inside one of the three big tents at last year's festival, as he sipped a frothy draft microbrewed in south Bohemia and brought to the table by a waitress in traditional costume.



An awful lot of beer gets served in the three weeks the fest goes on: more than 220,000 glasses, each of those a hefty half-litre. Visitors pay nothing to enter the site, and the beer is a bargain: \$2.50 a glass, paid with shiny tokens called tolars.

The formula is so successful, the organizers export the fest every fall to Frankfurt and New York City, where Czech beer – though not as famous as German or Belgian beer – is a much prized commodity.



But there's nothing quite like quaffing the real thing in Prague. Sixty per cent of the fest's clients are tourists, helped by the fact it takes only about 20 minutes to get to the site in Letňany by metro from downtown.

There's plenty of food there, too: grilled sausage with mustard and bread, spicy goulash with bread

dumplings, roasted chicken and goose, poached salmon meal with herbs and potatoes. You'll get your fill for under \$10.



Add to that a midway of rides for the kids and several bandstands for the adults, and the accent is on good times and laid-back partying, without the kind of uncouth behaviour you can get at other beer-drinking fests abroad.

Prajay Panchol knows about that. He's a young Brit who came to the Prague fest in 2010 with

a dozen buddies hailing from London, Southampton and Leicester. Their goal, as one of them put it: "Get drunk, try different beers."

"In England, drinking beer is a celebration of the effect (of alcohol), as opposed to here, where it's a celebration of the drink," Panchol said. "The mentality is different. It's less rowdy here, more civilized."

Then there's the beer itself. "It tastes cleaner, smoother. Less chemicals. And it's

about twice as cheap compared to the U.K."



Jan (Honza) Kocka is one of the reasons the reputation of Czech beers is soaring. Co-owner of Kocour Varnsdorf brewery in northern Bohemia, he writes about beer and is a judge at competitions in Europe and the U.S.

His brewery is renowned for its innovative products, including beers that are a rarity in the Czech Republic, like milk stout.

"In our country, people's tastes are pretty conservative," Kocka said between pulls of draft at the brewery's fest stand. "A lot of people have no idea there are different beers produced here, not just the usual lagers."

But that's changing.



"Czech brewers are starting to make IPAs (India pale ales), stouts, imperial stouts, altbiers - it's happening," said Evan Rail, author of *The Good Beer Guide to Prague & the Czech Republic*, a local beer lovers' bible.

"It's a return to normalcy, a return to a vibrant, diverse culture of beer instead of Pilsner monoculture," said Rail, an American who's lived in Prague for a decade and freelances for the New York Times.

"In 1900 there were hundreds of different kinds of beers produced here," he noted. "Every brewery produced a double-bock called salvator. That all disappeared after the Second World War, but now it's back."



When he wrote his book in 2007, there were only 22 brands of beer available in Prague, totally dominated by Pilsner Urquell and the other industrial beers.

"And now you can easily find 70," Rail observed.

Why?

"It just reached a tipping point for locals who were fed up with the monopolistic practices of the large, foreign-owned breweries. People here know what beer is supposed to taste like, and are asking for it."

Big-name foreign beers are also trendy; it's easy to order Stella Artois and Heineken in pubs here. But international travel has also created a taste for local versions of niche brews like Belgian Orval and Bavarian doppelbock.

At the Pivovarský Klub brew pub in Prague's Karlin district, a magnet for serious beer drinkers, Rail praised the choice of six Czech microbrews on draught – a selection that changes every month – as well as the long menu of 200 domestic and foreign craft beers sold by the bottle.

"The Czech beer style is delicate, fairly refined - it's subtle," Rail said, sipping a big, foamy mug of Stepan draught lager, while I sampled a summery Herold Bohemian Wheat lager.



"At its best, Czech beer is perfect in the heat, great as an aperitif, appreciated by connoisseurs. The beer culture here isn't about extremes, though you get those now, too. It's about being extremely drinkable."

Only a couple of decades ago, it was a different story. The Velvet Revolution brought a wave of privatizations that led many Czech breweries to close. From about 200 in 1989, only about 65 were left in 2003.

But the entrepreneurship of people who knew and liked beer brought a revival. By the middle of the decade, brew pubs had caught up to bottlers in number and now actually outnumber them two-to-one.

Good luck finding them in downtown Prague, however.

Taking the bait of free equipment, signs, lamps, coasters and menus offered by the big brewers, a lot of mainstream pubs offer the same old thing: Staropramen, Budvar, Pilsner Urquell and its sister beer, Gambrinus.

Venture out of the tourist areas of central Prague, however, and you'll find pubs that offer delicious Czech beers you've never heard of before – sometimes only one, other times as many as 20 on tap.

One more reason to drink Czech beer where it's made: Pilsners don't travel well. A lager that goes down easily in Prague can wind up as foul-tasting as wet cardboard once it makes it to our shores.

In the communist era, Pilsner Urquell was Czechoslovakia's undisputed top-seller. A premium brand, it wasn't adulterated with the cut-rate ingredients found in lesser brands, like Chinese hops and German hop extract.

It's still the most popular beer in the Czech Republic.

Competition is getting stronger, though, with mid-size breweries like Bernard making excellent beer and marketing it well, too (they sponsor music fests, for instance).

At the beer garden he frequents near his apartment in Žižkov, Chouinard, the expatriate filmmaker from Montreal, drinks the only beers on offer: Pilsner Urquell and Gambrinus.

"But I do feel a bit shameful about it," he admitted. "In the Czech Republic, those brands are like Molson is in Quebec – they're everywhere, and to me that's a problem."

To really indulge his habit of at least one beer a day – plus a glass of slivovice (a plum eau-de-vie) as a chaser – Chouinard haunts brew pubs like the Pivovarský Klub and less touristy taverns where the locals hang out.





"You know, in the Czech Republic, beer is cheaper than (bottled) water – and that makes it a very attractive place," he said with a laugh. "It's everywhere, too. In Prague, there's a hospoda (pub) every 100 metres."

His idea of a perfect day? "Taking my wife and kids to the park, going to the counter, buying a beer and sitting down to relax

and enjoy the sunset," he replied. "And maybe having a little slivovice later on, before going back home."

As the Czechs say, *Na zdraví*. Let's drink to that.

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IF YOU GO

How to get there

Czech Air Lines used to fly direct to Prague from Montreal, but no longer. If you plan on leaving from here, you can connect with a variety of airlines - try Czech Air Lines out of Toronto, Austrian Airlines via Vienna, or Air Canada and Lufthansa via Frankfurt (or better still, Munich, whose airport is more gemütlich). Expect to pay over \$1,100 in economy in the high season.

Where to stay

A brew pub and a hotel on the same premises - how convenient.

U Medvídků ("At the Little Bears") is a 500-year-old establishment in Prague's Old Town. Besides plenty of Budvar and house lagers on tap, there's a restaurant, music hall and beer museum. Thirty-three rooms, three-star rating, double occupancy with breakfast starting at \$108. Na Perstýně 7, Prague 1-Stare Mesto. www.umedvidku.cz

Best beer event

The Czech Beer Festival, May 12-28 at the PVA Letnany Exhibition Centre, Beranovych 667, Prague 9-Letnany (metro Letnany), www.ceskypivnifestival.cz. Entrance is free; beer is \$2.50 a half-litre glass.

Best brew pub

Pivovarský Klub, Krizikova 17, Prague 8-Karlin (metro Florenc), www.gastroinfo.cz/pivoklub.

There's a lot on tap, good meals, and you can also buy bottles to go.

Best beer shop

Besides the Pivovarský Klub, try the trail-blazing Pivni Galerie, U Pruhonu 9, Prague 7-Holesovice (tram #12 or 14), www.pivnigalerie.cz. This was the first beer store in the Czech Republic devoted to regional craft beers.

Easiest-to-reach beer shop

Galerie piva, Lazenska 15 Prague 1-Mala Strana (turn left off the Charles Bridge), www.czechbeershop.com. It's small but they have some decent beers; the owner is very friendly and speaks English.

Best guidebook

The Good Beer Guide to Prague & the Czech Republic, by Evan Rail (CAMRA Books, 2008, 220 pages). More than 100 breweries, 450 beers, more than 100 places to try them. It's \$16 at www.amazon.ca

And if you want a taste before you go

Try a new Quebec microbrew called TchèqueBec, made by a Czech expatriate in Contrecoeur, a small town northeast of Montreal. This lip-smacking lager is sold at 40 Montreal dépanneurs, mostly in the Plateau Mont-Royal, including Épicerie José at the corner of Duluth and Berri Sts. It costs \$15.99 for a two-litre jug, the only size available.