



Beer of the Month Club

December 2004 Selections

Petrus Winterbeer

Brouwerij Bavik, Bavikhove, West Flanders, Belgium

7.0%abv \$2.75/330ml

Bavik brewery was founded in 1894, by Joseph de Brabandere, in the small linen producing town of Bavikhove. Two key innovations made his brewery a quick success. First, the industrial revolution introduced steam engines, which led to the construction of large linen factories to do work that had previously been done on essentially an individual farmhouse level. Factories require workers, and the population of West Flanders (the most important linen producing region at the time) grew substantially. The second great innovation of the time was the introduction of the Pilsner-style beer. Up to that time, all the beers produced in the area were top-fermenting ales, which are delicious, but too heavy and expensive for your typical factory workers' lunch. The new Pils could be produced more rapidly and less expensively, and the lower alcohol and relative weight made it more attractive to the new working class in the region. By concentrating on Pilsner, de Brabandere was able to essentially corner the local market, and his brewery flourished.

During the German occupation of World War I, the brewery was closed by the occupying forces. However, at the end of the war, much rebuilding needed to be done just to the West of Bavikhove, at what had been the front during the war. De Brabandere took advantage of this fact, and reopened the brewery just as the rebuilding was beginning. Taking advantage of the fact that a cousin of his ran the local brickyard, de Brabandere shipped his kegs of beer to the 'front' on his cousin's brick wagon, thus saving the cost of cartage, and once again cornering the local market for affordable, well-made beer.

Joseph died at a young age in 1929, and the brewery was taken over by his wife, Gabrielle Vandeghinste, who operated the business until 1950. It was Gabrielle who convinced the Germans to allow her to keep the brewing operations running during WWII, and she became a bit of a local legend as a result. Just before the Germans invaded, she had purchased a brand-new Chevrolet truck to make the deliveries for the brewery. She actually managed to hide the new truck from the Germans in one of her warehouses for the entire length of the occupation, and at the end of the war was right back in business, delivering to the local pubs and construction sites, as the area rebuilt once again. In the late 1950's, the brewery expanded its offerings by adding bottled spring water from the same source as their brewing water, and a lemonade.

The brewery is now operated by Ignace de Brabandere, Joseph's grandson, and the third generation Master Brewer in the family. After steady expansion, Bavik began exporting their products throughout Europe in 1990, and to the United States in the year 2000. Bavik now produces over 80,000 barrels of beer each year, making it the largest brewery in West Flanders, and one of the ten largest in Belgium.

Bavik's most famous ale is their 'Petrus Old Brown', a classic example of the oak-aged, Flemish Brown Ale style. The Petrus (Latin for St Peter – and the jolly fat man on the label is St. Peter, not Santa!) Winterbeer is a variation on this style, being a blend of a strong, young brown ale with an unspecified amount of their Old Brown added for complexity and a hint of sourness. Both beers – the young and the old – are brewed using a selection of dark- and chocolate-malted barley, and locally grown hops. The real keys to the distinctive flavor of these ales, however, is the combination of pristine spring water that the brewery draws from a well over 100 meters beneath the brewery, and the proprietary yeast strain that is unique to the brewery. This yeast strain, combined with the slow maturation with indigenous yeasts in the brewery, is what makes the Petrus beers so wonderfully crisp and refreshing, with that characteristic sweet and sour tang that marks the Flemish Brown style. Serve your Winterbeer fairly well-chilled in a tulip shaped

beer goblet or a nice wine glass, but be sure to enjoy the evolution of flavors that occurs as the beer comes up to room temperature. This is truly a wine lovers' beer!

The Petrus Winterbeer pours into the glass with a brilliant, reddish-copper color and a very active, lacy foam. The nose is all about sweet malt and fruit notes, with hints of spice cake, candied sour cherries, even a touch of citrus. On the palate, the beer is initially quite dry, almost austere, but as your mouth gets used to its presence, more of the sweet/sour fruit notes will poke through that austerity, revealing a bit of the Old Ale character with notes of lactic acid tarting up the red fruits. It finishes with moderate hoppiness, just enough, really, to offer a hint of bitterness and balance to the beer. While the Petrus Winterbeer is perfect by itself on a cold winter night, it can also pair quite well with food, especially soft, mild cheeses served with rustic bread, or game birds roasted whole and served with winter vegetables.

Sticke Uerige

Zum Uerige (Obergarige Hausbrauerei), Düsseldorf, Germany

6.0%abv \$4.25/330ml

Built as a brewery in 1632, and converted to a brewpub and tavern in 1862, Zum Uerige is the historical heart of Düsseldorf Altbier brewing. Uerige is old German slang for a cranky or crabby man (Zum beans by or from), and the brewery was apparently named for the personality of its founder, Wilhelm Cuertin. The Cuertin family ran the brewery until its near total destruction in World War II, when the property was purchased by one Rudi Arnold. Herr Arnold spent four years rebuilding following the war, finally reopening the brewpub in 1949. The brewery has been owned and operated by Josef Schnitzler and his wife Christa since 1976. Zum Uerige is considered one of the 'must see' tourist attractions in the Old Quarter of Düsseldorf, as the ancient brewing equipment is nestled away deep in the old tavern, surrounded by a virtual warren of different pub rooms decorated in different styles representing a kind of historical tableau of old Düsseldorf.

Uerige are famous as the finest producer of *Altbier*, the local Düsseldorf style of ale. *Altbier*, literally, means 'old beer', but unlike Belgium and England – where an 'Old Ale' identifies a product with extended aging – the term *Altbier* refers to the 'old style' or old way of making beer. When the lager beer style spread from its home in Bohemia, and became quite the fad throughout much of Germany, a few small cities in the Ruhr basin resisted this new fad, and continued to brew top-fermenting ales in the old fashion. Today, the *Altbier* style is actually somewhere between a lager and an ale, being top-fermented at warmer temperatures like an ale, but cold-conditioned (or, *lagered*) for a period of time in the same way as a Pilsner. This results in an ale of fairly light, smooth character, generally less intense or hoppy than other ale types. Another local custom is for the local breweries to offer a 'special' beer to their regular clientele on certain occasions, usually a version of their traditional *Altbier* brewed to a higher strength, or with some secret ingredient or method of brewing employed. Sticke (German for secret) Uerige is Zum Uerige's special – or secret – brew.

The Sticke Uerige is brewed to a higher degree of alcohol than their regular *Altbier* (6.0% versus 4.6% alcohol by volume), but it is also dry-hopped during the brewing process, resulting in the hoppiest example of Düsseldorf *Altbier* that you will ever sample. The Sticke is brewed using Pilsner, caramel, and roasted malts, locally grown Spalt hops, and Uerige's unique strain of yeast. During the brewing process, the ale is repeatedly dry-hopped using the same Spalt hops. The Sticke is then cold-conditioned at 38°F for about five weeks to allow the brew to mellow. Prior to bottling, the beer is filtered, but not pasteurized, to retain its freshness of flavor. Sticke Uerige is brewed only twice a year, and only 250 barrels in each brew, making it one of the rarest beers in the world. *Altbiers* should be served fairly well-chilled, and are traditionally served in a small, straight-sided glass – one glass after another! In fact, when you enjoy these ales in their home pubs, you will be served another beer immediately after you finish the previous one, unless you put your beer coaster on top of your glass to signify that you have had enough. Now *that* is hospitality!

The Sticke Uerige pours a copperish-brown color, with very fine bubbles, but no lasting head. The nose shows hints of sweet, roasted malts, red fruits, and a bit of floral hoppiness. On the palate, there is an initial sense of sweet maltiness, but then the dry-hopped character of the beer jumps in, and it turns quite dry, with flavors of dried herbs, toasted brown bread, and a certain woodsiness. On the finish, the hops really kick in, with a hint of mintiness, and a very long, bittering aftertaste. A classic pairing for the sticke Uerige would be big heaping piles of cured meats and sausages, served with pickles, pickled onions, and spicy mustard; I think it would pair quite well with good, old American hot dogs, too.