



Beer Rules

This year sees the world celebrate 500 years of the German *Reinheitsgebot*, the country's so-called "beer purity law". By Lucy Corne (@LucyCorne)

There's a beer in Iceland that contains whale testicles. In England you can buy an ale brewed with blue cheese whey, while a Japanese brewery sold out of one speciality beer in mere minutes. The unique ingredient? Coffee beans which had passed through an elephant. Over in the USA, you can drink an ale containing margherita pizza, a lager sprinkled with moon dust or – if you're a real fan of weird ingredients in your beer – a Voodoo Doughnut Chocolate, Banana and Peanut Butter Ale.

But there's one country where you'll never find body parts or chunks of cheese in your pint. A country that proudly sticks to the four core ingredients found in virtually all beers: Germany. German brewers have long been limited to using water, hops, yeast and malted grain in their brew, thanks to the country's so-called "beer purity law". And

on 23 April, that piece of legislation – the *Reinheitsgebot* – is celebrating 500 years of keeping beer testicle-free.

Although Germans are fiercely proud of their "pure beer", when the *Reinheitsgebot* was first written, it wasn't all about ingredients. In fact, the original wording mentions the permitted ingredients only fleetingly. The majority of its text is dedicated to prescribing minimum beer prices for the summer and winter seasons. Still, when brewers today proclaim their beer to be "brewed to the 1516 German Purity Law", it's not a promise to keep the price of a pint below one pfennig. It's a promise that only certain substances will be used in the production of that beer.

The initial document mentioned just three ingredients – water, barley and hops. Although crucial nowadays for the fermentation of any alcoholic beverage, yeast had yet to be discovered, so it didn't make it into the

purity law until long after Louis Pasteur had learnt of its existence. Another component conspicuous by its absence was wheat, a grain which has long been popular in German brewing. It's generally agreed that when the Duke of Bavaria instigated the original beer law, it was to help preserve the wheat crop for Bavarian bakers – and to keep bread at an affordable price. Others think there was something a little less benevolent about the grain restrictions, though, suggesting that noble folk, passionate about pale-coloured beer, wanted to hold a monopoly on wheat and the *weissbier* it helped create.

The law has gone through many incarnations – and several name changes – throughout the years, but has remained

in force to some extent, particularly in its homeland of Bavaria. Today wheat is permitted, as well as certain other grains and sugars, though hard-liners staunchly avoid using things that other brewers take for granted in the brewing process – finings to clear up the beer, hop oils or extracts and even the use of CO₂ to force-carbonate, instead opting for a natural way to create bubbles. It's honourable to stick to this centuries-old tradition, but with beer (particularly craft beer) priding itself on innovation, is the *Reinheitsgebot* still relevant – and does anyone follow it outside Germany?

Imke Pape has only been brewing beer for a little over five years, but she's proud that every drop produced at her Rustenburg-based brewery conforms to the 500-year-old purity

law. One of SA's first female craft brewers, Pape grew up in a German community in North West province and her heritage is proudly on show at Brauhaus am Damm. Within the large brew pub, you can order a hefty portion of eisbein or a plate of wurst – and, of course, there's the liquid refreshment. The beers are deliciously German – a malty lager, an award-winning *weissbier*, a crisp and bitter pilsner and a hearty *dunkel* the colour of chestnuts. "We brew according to the *Reinheitsgebot* very strictly," explains Pape. "No finings, no forced CO₂ – not even filtering or pasteurising at this stage." She explains the reason. "When you drink a *Reinheitsgebot* beer, you know you're getting what you bargained for – beer made with natural ingredients and nothing else."

Criticism is often heaped on the centuries-old *Reinheitsgebot*, claiming that it curbs creativity or is merely a marketing gimmick. People point out that just because you stick to the four ingredients, that doesn't guarantee a good beer and that it's the experience and passion of German brewers, rather than the limitations on ingredients, that enable them to consistently churn out world-class brews.

In fact, on beer blogs and brewer forums, there's so much criticism of the purity law that it's easy to believe there's nothing good to be said for it. But then you meet someone like Wolfgang Koedel, Master Brewer at Cape Brewing Company (CBC), just outside Paarl in the Western Cape. Born and raised in Bavaria, Koedel hasn't lived or brewed in Germany for 20 years, but that hasn't watered down his

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► resolve to keep his beer as pure as possible. “It’s a morality thing,” he says. “I have no problem with a Belgian cherry beer, for example. I can fully accept other beers and I enjoy tasting them. However, as a Bavarian, I just can’t brew them myself.” He stresses the difference between adding complementary ingredients to a beer that are appropriate to the style – the citrus peel and coriander of a Belgian *witbier*, for example – and using adjuncts, extracts and enzymes to cut corners and speed up the brewing process. Of course, as a purist, he’s never himself brewed a beer that doesn’t adhere to Bavarian standards, so coriander, cherries and orange peel are all off the menu. Which begs the question: could the critics have a point when they say that the rules severely restrict the creativity of German brewers?



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It’s true that when you travel from bar to bar in Germany, you soon become acquainted with a few familiar beer styles, though many think it has less to do with the *Reinheitsgebot* and more to do with the parochial nature of the average German beer-drinker. Indeed, since Koedel started manning the brew

kettles at CBC in 2012, he’s certainly stepped out of his comfort zone. Alongside more commonplace German styles like pilsner and *weissbier*, he’s created Cape of Good Hops Imperial IPA – a powerful and bitter ale showcasing the tropical fruit aromas of American hops. Typically German it isn’t, but brewed within the parameters of the *Reinheitsgebot* it certainly is.

“There are so many beer styles you can brew according to the purity law that I don’t think we’ll ever run out of recipes,” grins Koedel. And would he ever consider brewing a non-conformist beer, perhaps at CBC’s new, smaller facility in Franschoek? “I won’t exclude the possibility of us brewing a non-*Reinheitsgebot* there, as long as it’s true to its style – like one of the Belgian beers. But would I ever brew something with peanut butter and marshmallows? Well, maybe you can talk me into it after I’ve downed nine pints of *Reinheitsgebot* beer!”

Craft beer is booming in SA and many of the country’s 150 or so small breweries loosely follow the *Reinheitsgebot*. Indeed, the basic principles of the purity law – to keep beer as natural as possible – are the very foundation of the craft beer ethos. Some local brewers are staunch supporters of it, others offer a vague nod and a rising number are tossing the German rulebook out the window and experimenting with South African grains, herbs and foodstuffs. But for now, at least, *Reinheitsgebot* or not, you can rest assured that your pint of South African beer is 100% testicle-free. 🍀



CRAFT REBELS

While no-one (thankfully) is adding pizza toppings or whale unmentionables to their beer in SA, plenty of mavericks brew defiantly in the face of the *Reinheitsgebot*. Here are a few of them:

SMACK! REPUBLIC

Johannesburg’s first inner-city brewery pours pints of bourbon-infused stout. Or, for something truly South African, try the pale ale with rooibos and blue gum honey. *Visit:* www.smackrepublic.com

ANVIL ALE HOUSE

Off the beaten track in Mpumalanga, brewer Theo de Beer produces a buchu ale, as well as a *witbier* seasoned with coriander and dried naartjie peel. *Visit:* www.anvilbrewery.com

AFRO CARIBBEAN BREWING COMPANY

This new Cape Town brew pub has two flagship brews – Coconut IPA and Chili Bacon Ale, though the latter contains no meat, manipulating the malt to lend a smoky flavour. 157-2nd Ave, Kenilworth, Cape Town. Tel: 021 674 0186.

SOWETO GOLD

Alongside its flagship lager, the Soweto-based brewery produces an apple ale and a spicy alcoholic ginger beer. *Visit:* www.sowetogold.co.za

DEVIL’S PEAK BREWING COMPANY

Cape Town’s cutting-edge brewery has regular, limited-release beers, including a beer-wine hybrid created with a Swartland winery. *Visit:* www.devilspkbrewing.co.za