Right: The smiling service is no extra charge for the people who come from all over the world to sample the Schlenkerla Beer.
Below: The secret is in the smoked hops. Left: Even with many major requests to export, Schlenkerla Beer makers wish to remain a small non-commercial German tradition.

Smoke Gets in Your Beer

Story and photos by Sp4 Stephen Hill

Let’s say you’re a “newbie” stationed in or near Bamberg, West Germany.

On one of your first evenings, a couple of the “old timers” ask if you’ve tried a “smoked beer” yet. Note the twinkle in their eyes as you confess you haven’t.

Soon you find yourself sitting in an antiquated Gasthaus in the old section of Bamberg. A dark-colored beer is placed under your nose, and your new friends watch for your reaction as you take your first taste.

If you’re like most people, you don’t like the
smoked beer at first. More than likely your taste buds are sent into shock. But since the "old timers" are drinking the stuff with such obvious relish, you put up with a couple more sips.

It’s not until you stand up to leave that you find out what smoked beer is all about. Use caution when drinking this beer—it checks in at 13.5 percent alcohol.

You may not enjoy your first Schlenkerla Beer, but chances are the next time out you’ll find out how to get to 16 Sandstrasse on your own.

The easiest way to find Schlenkerla is to go to the canal closest to the city square. There are two walking bridges over the canal. Walk over the lower bridge into the oldest part of Bamberg. One block after the bridge the street curves to the right. Follow the curve around, and in one half-block you'll see an old building on your right with green shutters and a round sign that says "Schlenkerla Rauchbier."

Legend has it that the first smoked beer was made when the area that the hops were stored in caught fire. Rather than throw the partially burned hops away, the brewers used the damaged hops to make an experimental batch of brew. The experimental beer had a distinct, smoky flavor and was readily accepted.

Today, instead of burning the hops storage area, brewers now roast and smoke the hops over a fine mesh screen with a beechwood fire underneath. The temperature always remains constant, insuring an even roast. This process is responsible for the beer's special aroma, dark color and heady taste.

Schlenkerla is a family-operated business officially established in 1678. The beer is one of Bamberg's greatest tourist attractions. People come from all over Europe to sample it.

If you like a little something to eat with your beer, you can bring your own sandwiches. The hours to do this are 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. and 2 to 6:30 p.m. Plates and silverware are provided upon request.

Sp4 Hill is assigned to the Bamberg Big Time community newspaper.