Zuhause

At Home

In its 300-year-old Gasthaus, the Schenkerla brewery serves up the Bamberg specialty of smoky beer—a unique taste that might take some getting used to.

BY SHARON HUDGINS

Historic Bamberg, the guidebooks always say. “Former residence of a Holy Roman Emperor, City of Gothic and Baroque architecture. Location of Tilman Riemen Schneider’s sculptural masterpiece, the tomb of Emperor-Saint Heinrich II and Kunigunde—as well as Veit Stoss’s famous Nativity altarpiece.”

But there are some of us who think that the main reason for going to Bamberg is to drink its unique beer.

I discovered the local specialty on my first visit to the former imperial city several years ago. The weather was bitterly cold, so my husband and I retreated to the shelter of a charming, half-timbered Gasthaus in the old part of the town, in search of food and drink. The 300-year-old Gasthaus was owned by Schenkerla, one of the local breweries, and everyone inside was drinking the same thing: half-liter glasses of dark (almost black) beer, topped with thick foam the color of brown sugar.

Being a devotee of dark beers, I was pleased to find a Gasthaus where dark beer was available on tap.

But I was unprepared for my first swallow of Bamberg’s specialty. The beer tasted like someone had left a smoked ham soaking in it. I even wondered if my glass had not been thoroughly washed after its last use, leaving the taste of someone else’s smoked-meat lunch to pollute the drink. I asked my husband for a sip from his glass. Same taste. I looked around the Gasthaus. At least two dozen other people were taking long swigs of the dark brew, as if nothing were wrong. Did they know something that I didn’t?

Halfway through my first glass, I decided the taste wasn’t really so strange. After all, I liked smoked meats and smoked cheeses. Why not smoked beer? By the end of my third glass, I was a convert, willing to claim that this was one of the world’s great beers. I’ve stood by that claim ever since.

It wasn’t until we were leaving the Gasthaus that we discovered the name of the unusual beer. Appropriately called Rauchbier—smoky beer—it’s made by breweries in Bamberg that use an old-fashioned method to produce the beer’s unique flavor.

The first step in beer brewing is to turn grains of barley into malt. The starches in the hard grains have to be made soluble in water and converted into their component sugars, before fermentation can begin. The malting process involves steeping the barley in water for a specific period of time, then drying it to prevent germination. There are several methods by which malt can be dried. In Bamberg some of the malt is dried over fires made of aged beechwood logs, producing a malt that is partially roasted and permeated with smoke. And the resulting Rauchbier brewed from this malt retains the smoky flavor and aroma.

Rauchbier is one of many styles of bottom-fermented beer, known as lager beers, that are produced in Germany. Several breweries make their own versions of smoky beer, most of them located in Bamberg and neighboring cities in the German region of Franconia. I am partial to Bamberger Rauchbier fresh and foaming from the tap, but bottled Rauchbier is also available in Germany, and a small amount is even exported to the United States. Wherever you drink it, however, Rauchbier is an unusual and unforgettable treat for the taste buds. Prost!

Smoky Beer-Braised Pork Loin

The beer and root vegetables in this recipe produce a richly flavored sauce for the meat. If Rauchbier isn’t available, substitute another not-too-bitter dark beer.

2 Tbsp. butter
5 pounds pork loin roast (or pork arm-shoulder roast)
3 large onions, chopped
6 carrots, peeled and diced
2 large garlic cloves, chopped
2 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. black pepper

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1/2 tsp. ground allspice
1 bay leaf
4 whole cloves
2 cups Rauchbier (or other dark beer)
4 medium gingersnaps, crumbled

Preheat the oven to 350°. Heat the butter in a frying pan and brown the pork well. (This should take about 10 minutes.) Remove the pork and set aside. Sauté the onions in the butter and pork drippings until they are soft but not browned.

Combine onions with carrots, garlic, salt, pepper, allspice, bay leaf, and cloves. Spread this mixture over the bottom of a 5-quart casserole. Place the pork roast on top of the vegetable mixture, pour the dark beer over it, and cover the casserole.

Cook, tightly covered, in the oven at 350° for 2 hours, turning the meat over once after the first hour of cooking. At the end of the braising period, check to see if the pork is tender when pierced with a fork or skewer. If not, return it to the oven and continue braising it until the meat is tender but not dry.

Remove the pork from the pan, place it on a heatproof platter, cover tightly with aluminum foil, and keep the pork warm in the oven (turned to low heat) while you make the sauce. Pour the rest of the contents of the casserole into a large bowl. Remove the bay leaf and skim off the fat. Pour the remaining liquid and solids into a blender or food processor, add the crumbled gingersnaps, and process until the mixture is smooth.

Pour this sauce into a medium-sized saucepan. (Add a little water, stock, or cream if the purée seems too thick.) Bring the sauce to a simmer over medium heat, stirring constantly. Slice the pork and arrange it on a serving platter. Spoon the sauce over the pork. (Any extra sauce can be served separately.)

Serve hot, accompanied by egg noodles, boiled potatoes, or tiny German Spätzle dumplings, and plenty of good dark beer. Makes 8 servings.

Sharon Hudgins writes from Pittsburg, Texas.