

Franconia fosters farmhouse brews

By Derrick Schneider

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Think of a German beer region, and you probably think of Bavaria. The south-east quadrant of Germany holds half of the country's 1,200 breweries. But half of Bavaria's breweries sit in Oberfranken, or Upper Franconia, a tiny, rural, castle-speckled province.

Despite the many beers and the swarm of breweries — Bamberg, the photogenic heart of Oberfranken, has nine breweries for its 70,000 inhabitants — Franconian beers rarely show up in the United States. Most never leave the pubs where they're made.

The Franks who gave their name to Franconia etched themselves into history — Charlemagne was a Frank, France was named for the tribe, and Belgium's north-south language divide arose from far-reaching Frankish holdings. Their descendants hold fast to that cultural heritage. They have their own dialect; they joke about not being Bavarian; and while most of Germany embraced industrial brewing, Franconia kept alive small farmhouse brewers who make beer for village regulars.

"There are big economies of scale in brewing," says Fred Waltman, who runs the Web site Franconiabeerguide.com.

"The larger you get, the more you can spread the cost. Industrialization drove a lot of the small breweries out of business, but not in this region. They've kept their own beer culture."

Franconia's largest brewery, Kulmbacher, makes just 1.3 million hectoliters (about 366,000 12-ounce beer bottles) of beer each year, well under America's "craft beer" levels (2.3 million hectoliters). "The beer is special because it's a local product that's part of the culture," says Waltman. "You drink it in the local gasthaus. It's

cozy. A lot of times these are mom-and-pop places. Nephews and cousins and uncles all help out."

That quaint image doesn't always come with high quality. Dan Shelton, a beer importer who champions Franconia, says, "You get breweries that don't filter; they don't know about pasteurization." He dislikes these brewery techniques in general, but without them a brewer needs a cautious hand. "Things taste fantastic," he says, "or they taste off."

But even the best Franconian brewers aim for the everyday drinker, not the thrill-seeking beer snob. Waltman contrasts Belgium's prestigious brews with Franconia's farmhouse ales.

"Belgian beers kind of hit you over the head," he says. "They have unusual flavors; they're big. In Belgium, if you ask for recommendations for 10 breweries, they would all be cafes: People sitting around sipping these strong beers. In Germany, and especially in Franconia, beer is what you drink all day long. The beers are designed to be drunk." Simple flavors, well-balanced hops and low alcohol create a drink that can go with your week-night dinner or your afternoon break.

The typical Franconian brewery, packed with long tables and a murmuring crowd of regulars, makes the lager styles you find elsewhere in Germany, but it also makes beers you'll find nowhere else: The most famous is rauchbier, or "smoke beer."

Historically, brewers dried malt over a fire, and inevitably the complex flavor of the billowing smoke stuck to the grain.

"It is clear that many, if not most beers . . . were smoky at one time," write Ray Daniels and Geoffrey Larson in their book "Smoked Beers" (Brewers Publications, 2001). Brewers discovered that straw and coal put less smoke flavor into the malt, and they ex-

plored other drying techniques. By the late 1800s, rauchbier had died out everywhere except in Franconia.

To this day, write Daniels and Larson, a beer competition's smoked beer category often contains the subgroups "Bamberg-Style Rauchbier" — after the town most familiar to non-Franconians — and "All Other Smoked Beers."

Two Bamberg breweries, Spezial and Schlenkerla, smoke their own malt over a beech fire; most rauchbier producers buy grain from a malting company in the town. Brewers add smoked malt based on their own tastes, creating beers that range from barely smoky to aggressively so.

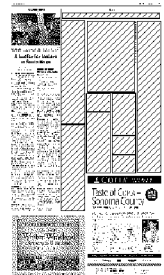
The unusual taste puts off many first-time rauchbier drinkers. Common Franconian wisdom says that it takes three glasses of rauchbier before you like the flavor, either because your tongue adapts or you're too drunk to care.

But rauchbier isn't the only Franconian holdover from the past. Shelton has started to bring ungespundetsbier, or "unbunged beer," to the United States. This ancient treatment requires little

more than removing the bung, a large plug, from the side of a barrel as the malt ferments inside: Without the plug, carbon dioxide escapes through the hole.

"People bring their own kegs to get 'raw beer' from a brewery," he explains. "They remove the bung and put (the cask) in a cave for a few days. It changes the flavor completely. After you taste these beers, most German beers taste like nothing." But getting unbunged beers into a bottle and into the United States is a challenge. These lightly carbonated beers have a short shelf life. Shelton has brought in some bottles, but he wants to start importing fresh casks at regular intervals.

He realizes they will be a tough sell. "When American beer drink-



ers spend more money on a beer," he says, "they want more alcohol. It's a real challenge to sell something that's not rare in its homeland but that costs a lot to get in. People need to get used to paying for character."

The best way to taste Franconian beers is in Franconia, but you can replicate the farmhouse brew-

ery experience at home: Buy some bottles, invite some friends over for a hearty meal, and enjoy the simple pleasure of delicious beer.

Derrick Schneider is a freelance writer and the publisher of the blog An Obsession With Food. E-mail comments to wine@sfchronicle.com.

Tasting notes

Despite the small amount of Franconian beer that comes into the country, Beverages & More in Oakland is a good Northern California source for the Shelton Brothers imports: Spezial, Kulmbacher and Mahr's. Others can be found at City Beer Store in San Francisco. Though ungespundetsbier hasn't arrived in full force yet, Shelton anticipates selling it to San Francisco's Toronado bar when it arrives in February or March. Serve rauchbier with smoked hams, sausages and cheese, though the book "Smoked Beers" also suggests it as a marinade.

— Derrick Schneider

Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier

(\$6/16.9 ounces) Imagine the creosote and cloud of smoke in a hickory barbecue pit, and you'll have a good idea of how this rauchbier smells, though the flavor adds a meaty quality reminiscent of kielbasa.

Kulmbacher Monchshof Kellerbrau

(\$4.50/16.9 ounces) This musky, yeasty brew evokes the smells of a bakery's neighborhood, but light hints of grapefruit zest, cheese and molasses create a beer that is as complex as it is balanced.

Kulmbacher Eisbock

(\$12/six-pack of 11.2-ounce bottles) This deep, rich beer — the result of freezing a doppelbock to create a beer with a high alcohol density — has a surprisingly floral note in a flood of molasses, coffee and cocoa powder aromas. Molasses and menthol mingle on the palate, though light, tingy acidity and low bitterness keep this beer lively.

Kulmbacher EKV 28

(\$15/six-pack of 11.2-ounce bottles) Intense aromas of banana pancakes cover all but a whiff of baked spiced pears in this well-balanced, flavorful beer. Banana pancakes continue on the palate with a prickly acidity and a hint of molasses on the finish.

Mahr's Brau Jubelfestbier

(\$5/16.9 ounces) Brown sugar mixed with pancake batter seems at odds with the beer's dark color, as does a body so light that it borders on watery.

St. Michaelsberg Kellerbier

(\$10/16.9 ounces) This lightweight beer mixes light coffee and chocolate aromas with a whiff of orange zest, but the flavor is all grapefruit zest with a pleasant, pronounced malty finish.

Spezial Rauchbier

(\$4/16.9 ounces) The smokiness in this beer evokes a grill or a campfire, but the dominant aroma is rich bran muffin batter. The light smoke on the palate enhances an earthy, forest-floor flavor that finishes with a pleasant malt character.



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Three Franconian beers, from left: St. Michaelsberg Kellerbier, Mahr's Brau Jubelfestbier and Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier.