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TOP: Westmalle Brewery and Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Heart.
MIDDLE: A chalice of Westvleteren 12, the Holy Grail of Belgian beer, on the patio at In de Vrede, the Sint-Sixtus Abbey cafe.
BOTTOM: Adding hops at Trappist Brewery Westmalle near Antwerp.

BELGIAN BEER PILGRIMAGE

A quest for the Holy Grail of Trappist ales.

Story by LISA KADANE

» Tucked in the shadow of the St. Sixtus Abbey amid the pastoral Belgian countryside, the In de Vrede is the only place in the world you can sip from a chalice of Westvleteren 12. This dark, complex ale is often cited as the world's best brew, and beer lovers from the planet's far corners begin arriving when the abbey café opens its doors at 10 a.m.

My husband and I have flown across an ocean, circled Belgium in a car, and cycled four miles from the charming town of Poperinge to try it. When the beer bottles arrive at our table, we pour the vaunted

elixir into special Westvleteren glasses to create an inch of head, breathe in the aromas of brown sugar and cherries, then taste the strong combination of malty caramel, hints of fruit, and winter spice.

After one sip my husband declares, "Angels should come out of the sky and toot their horns over this beer."

It really is that good.

Ever since we stumbled across a convenience store in Israel stocked with Belgian labels including Chimay, Leffe, and Duval, we've been smitten with beer produced in this small country.



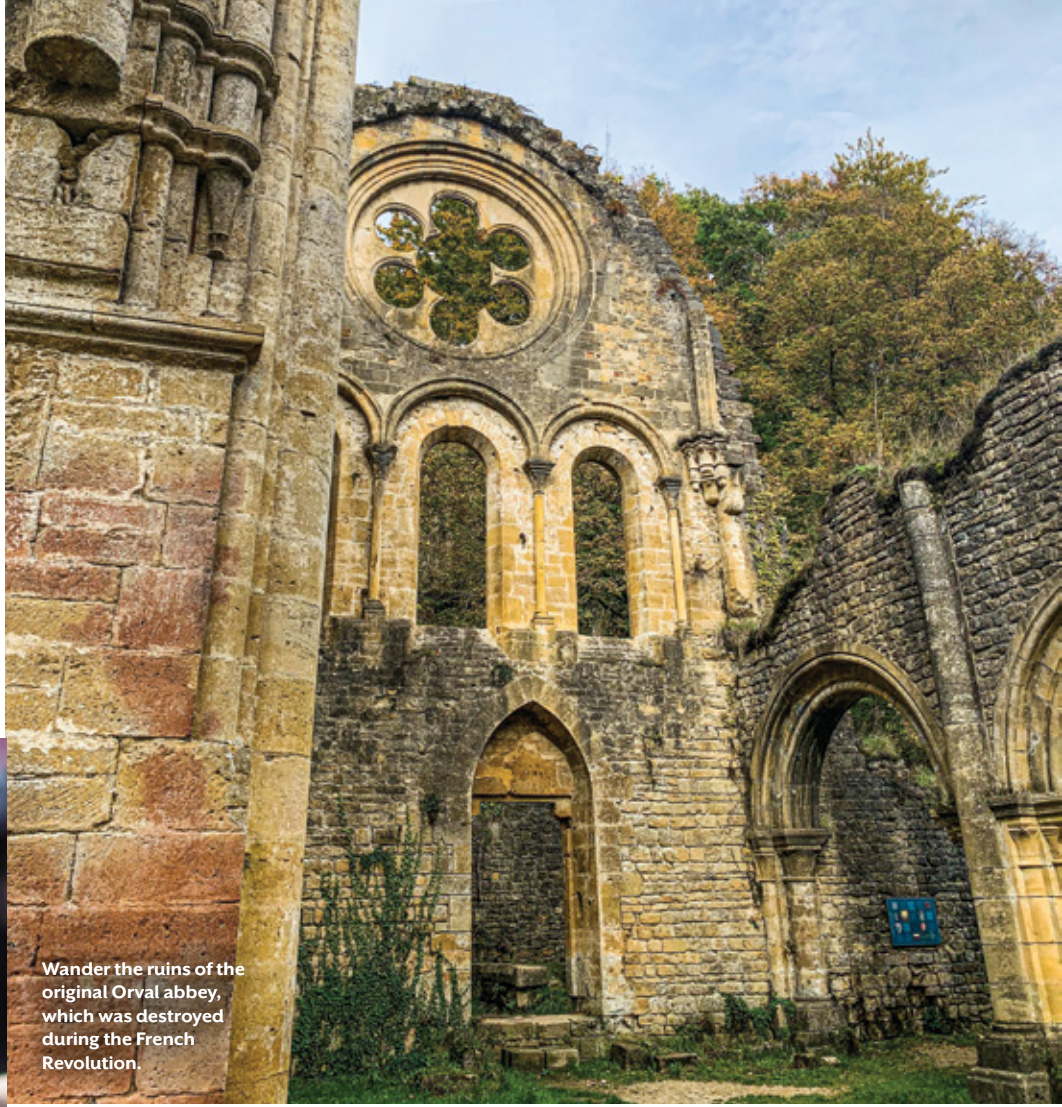
TOP AND BOTTOM PHOTOS COURTESY VISIT FLANDERS; MIDDLE PHOTO BY LISA KADANE

WHAT'S IN A GLASS?

Visitors to Belgium will soon notice that every beer is served in its own unique, branded glass. As I learned at Maison Leffe in Dinant, home of Abbey beer Leffe, the taste and experience of beer is partially determined by the shape of the glass. Trappist and Abbey ales are usually served in a chalice-shaped glass. Pouring the beer in directly creates a one-inch head that should exaggerate the fruity taste of the beer, and the wide opening allows for deep sips.



Sample Trappist beer Chimay at Espace Chimay.



Wander the ruins of the original Orval abbey, which was destroyed during the French Revolution.

We soon learned there's a hierarchy to beer in Belgium, with Trappist ales like Westvleteren sitting firmly at the top of the beeramid. So we planned a quest to find the best, driving Belgium's scenic country roads and hitting all of the country's Trappist breweries—plus La Trappe, just across the border in the Netherlands—during a week-long pilgrimage.

"Trappist" is a controlled term of origin that denotes a beer made inside an abbey, with the brewing managed by Trappist monks, and a portion of the profits going to charity. There are also Trappist breweries in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Austria, England, and the United States, but Belgium boasts the most with five. (It had six until January 2021 when Achel Brewery was kicked out of the exclusive fraternity after the last of its monks retired. Achel is now considered an "Abbey" beer.)

Before embarking on our journey, my image of monks was, embarrassingly, informed by Robin Hood's Friar Tuck—I pictured jolly men in robes touring visitors around the brewery and (wink wink) sampling the goods at happy hour.

In reality, these Trappist monks follow St. Benedict's rules of obedience, humility, and contemplation explains Claude Roulant as he guides us around the public areas of the Notre-Dame d'Orval Abbey, located in the south of Belgium near the French border. It's very rare that a visitor will actually see a monk, and most breweries do not offer tours. Beer must be sampled at an abbey café or purchased at an abbey store for takeaway.

Orval's museum shows videos that explain the daily life of its 16 monks who, like all monks considered Trappist, belong to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO). Theirs is an unwavering schedule that includes eight hours each of prayer, work, and sleep. This 24-hour adherence begs the question, where does beer fit in?

At Orval, monks began brewing their trademark bitter ale in 1932 to make

money to rebuild the abbey, which lay in ruins for 133 years after it was destroyed in the French Revolution. Now, the stunning sandstone abbey, with its imposing statue of Madonna and child, is the country's most photogenic.

At the other Trappist breweries we visit, the monasteries use the beer sales to cover living expenses and maintenance of the buildings and grounds. The remaining profits are donated to humanitarian causes, organizations that support people with disabilities, or monasteries in developing countries, for example. The fact that their coveted beers have become a global sensation doesn't seem that important to them.

"The monks want to keep an atmosphere of austerity. They don't want too many tourists," says Benoit Minet, operations manager at nearby Rochefort Brewery, on the grounds of Notre-Dame de Saint-Rémy de Rochefort Abbey, which is home to 14 monks.

The least commercialized of the Trappist breweries, visitors are only able to peek inside the church or buy the popular Rochefort 6, 8, or 10, or the new Triple Extra, at the abbey shop (there is



Brewery Westmalle, Antwerp 2.



THE TRAPPIST BREWERIES OF BELGIUM

WESTMALLE >> Try Westmalle's Tripel, Dubbel, and Extra at the Café Trappisten, located a half-mile from the abbey. trappistwestmalle.be/en

ORVAL >> Go on a self-guided tour through the abbey ruins and museum, then taste the beer at A l'Ange Gardien down the road. orval.be/en/page/447-brewery

ROCHEFORT >> There is a small reception area where you can purchase the Rochefort 6, 8, 10, or Triple Extra for takeaway. abbaye-rochefort.be/index.php

CHIMAY >> The church is open to the public, and there's a forest trail from the abbey to Espace Chimay, an interactive museum. Sample the Chimay Green, Red, White, and Blue at adjacent L'Auberge du Poteaupré. chimay.com/en/espace-chimay-2/

WESTVLETEREN Stop by the In de Vrede to sample the Westvleteren Blond, 8 and 12, or to purchase bottles for takeaway. trappistwestvleteren.be/en

Short on time? The abbey shop at Achel Brewery near Antwerp sells all of the Trappist beers (and their corresponding glasses), except Westvleteren. Many beer shops in Bruges are also well-stocked.

no café or tasting room on site). "People come from all over the world to visit, but they can't," says Minet, noting that visitors are disappointed they can't go inside the brewery. "It's very strange, but maybe that's why we are famous."

Since the public is, for the most part, shut out of the brewing process, there's an air of mystery surrounding Trappist ales. It plays into their appeal, but most beer lovers won't argue the fact they are excellent. Every Trappist brewery has its own spring or well, and water—along with malt and hops—is a primary element in the beer-making process. Additionally, each brewery pitches a secret proprietary yeast into the wort, and the resulting top fermentation turns it into an ale. Whether it's a double (dark), triple (golden), or quadruple (strong dark) depends on the amount of malt and the type of sugar used.

Finally, a second fermentation happens inside the bottle. This increases the alcohol content (quadruples like the Westvleteren 12 clock in at between 10 and 13 percent ABV), and it's why you'll find a yeast residue at the bottom of the bottle. It also gives these beers a shelf-life of up to five years.

Between my first Trappist ale at Westmalle and my last at Westvleteren, it's fair to say I've reached beer enlightenment. Along the way, I've gained a respect for the traditions and way of life of the men behind the Trappist label. The "beer of work and prayer," as it's called at La Trappe Brewery, has rightfully become the Holy Grail of ales. &



Our Lady of Koningshoeven Abbey, the home of La Trappe Trappist beer.

THIS PAGE ABOVE LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY ESPACE CHIMAY; THIS PAGE ABOVE RIGHT: PHOTO BY BLAKE FORD
THIS PAGE ABOVE LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY VISIT FLANDERS; THIS PAGE RIGHT: PHOTO BY LISA KADANE