

06 December 2012

## Krakow brews a beer scene of its own

By Andy Jarosz



In Krakow, a growing band of beer enthusiasts are developing a vibrant brewing scene. (Bruce Yuanyue Bi/LPI/Getty)

It was late evening in the Krakow district of Kazimierz, and the [Strefy Piwa](#) (Beer Zone) pub was in full swing with midweek revellers. A group of friends were sharing jokes over a round of drinks and a couple of young men in white work shirts sat at one of the few tables scattered around the sparse brick interior.

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While Strefy Piwa has mainly Polish and Czech beers on tap -- including an India Pale Ale (IPA) made by [Artezan](#), a small craft brewery near Warsaw -- the bar also offers a wide range of bottled brews from countries such as the US, Netherlands and Belgium. One wall of the pub was covered with different coloured bottle tops from around the world, and a globe sat by the bar, presumably to help patrons locate the many countries from which the brews originate. Sitting comfortably with a pint in hand, I listened as the owner

engaged in a lively debate with a local brewer about the quality of the latest beer on offer.

Beer is a serious topic in Krakow, where a growing band of enthusiasts are developing a vibrant brewing scene. New microbreweries are opening across Poland every month, and Krakow is becoming one of the best places in Europe to sample Polish beers made by producers driven more by their passion for quality than by building a lucrative large-scale business.

There was a time not so long ago when going to a typical bar in Poland was an altogether different experience. The small Polish breweries that existed before World War II were liquidated in the post-war years, and the larger breweries were nationalised. The bars that remained, hidden away from public view, were dingy dens of sorrow frequented by hardcore drinkers eager to escape the troubles of everyday life with little care for their surroundings.

But times have changed. In the early 1990s with the advent of a free market in Poland, the large national breweries began selling off their unprofitable assets, which typically included brewing equipment that could not produce beer on a sufficiently large scale. These tools of the trade were then bought up by small entrepreneurs who saw the microbrewery model of the United States as a blueprint for success. At that time, more than 700,000 people in the US had started making their own beer, leading to the formation of the 1,600 independent breweries that now operate across the country. Soon a number of young Poles set up their own operations, travelling around Europe and to the US in order to learn from those who had recently taken the same steps.

Poland now has around 100 microbreweries run by a small core of dedicated enthusiasts who are collaborating to build a growing demand for craft beers. The [Polish Association of Home Brewers](#), established in 2010, now has more than 200 members, and the group organises 15 annual brewing contests around the country and produces a quarterly newspaper called *The Brewer* to encourage brewing as a hobby. In a culture where alcohol was once taken primarily for its "medicinal" properties, it is no small accomplishment to now see people sniffing, sipping and vigorously debating the merits of their carefully produced beers.

At the hugely popular [House of Beer](#) pub in Krakow's Old Town, the lines at the bar were three deep and the din of the crowd drowned out the sport games that were playing on TV. Over a bottle of citrus-flavoured Rowing Jack IPA made by Poland's [Ale Browar](#) near Gdansk, Tomasz Rogaczewski, founder of the [Four Sides of Beer](#) website and a judge at beer festivals across Europe, talked about how the beer scene in Krakow has evolved. "A few years ago the people who were producing Polish beer had little knowledge or interest in brewing," he said. "They were in it purely for the money. But now we have genuine enthusiasts, willing to help each other as part of a community dedicated to creating the best quality beers."

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Rogaczewski is busy setting up his own craft brewery in Krakow and is one of a few young beer makers who conduct tasting courses. Much like the wine-tasting classes that have long been popular around the world, students at his classes are taught how to recognise the smell of a good beer, how to describe its taste and how to pair different types of beers with food. Courses run once or twice a month at various bars around Krakow and attract a diverse audience from hardcore enthusiasts to curious novices. Information about upcoming dates and venues are posted on the [Four Sides of Beer](#) website.

In the [Omerta](#) pub in the Kazimierz quarter, Rogaczewski's claim that he can find a beer to suit anyone's taste – even those who have never enjoyed the taste of beer – seems plausible. The bar has an impressive list of 28 different beers, all served using the traditional taps found in old-fashioned British pubs. Half of the beers on offer are international ales while the others are from Polish brewers, including the imaginatively named light beer [Pierwsza Pomoc](#) (First Aid) from the Pinta brewery.

In a sure sign of Krakow's growing taste for artisan beers, an old tram terminus near the Vistula river in the Kazimierz district has been restored and recently opened as the cavernous 600-seat [Stara Zajezdnia](#) restaurant, with its 40m bar rumoured to be the longest in Poland. The size of the restaurant alone suggests a healthy confidence in the market for locally produced beers. Try a pint of dark toffee-scented Stout, brewed by Spiz brewery, whose headquarters is based in nearby Katowice.

While the old tram terminus is new on the scene, [CK Browar](#) is Poland's oldest microbrewery and the only brewery-restaurant in Krakow. Stepping down from the busy city streets into CK's basement-level space, two large copper vats shine behind the bar. A selection of home-made Polish brews is available, most of which are based on recipes from when Krakow was under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1790s to 1918). Try the CK Jasne (a pale, wheaty beer) or the CK Dunkel Wiezen, a dark beer with a yeasty flavour. Customers can even order their own 2m-high beer tower complete with tap, to save them from needing refills.

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