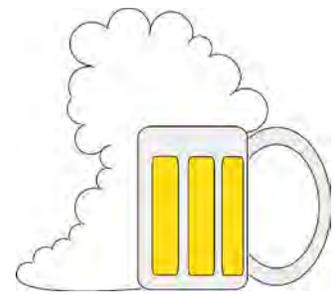


August 8, 2016



Romancing the Foam No. 98

It was 1971 and my friend Don and I had scored a job from December into mid-February at Hotel Tamara on Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal a couple of blocks off Dam Square in Amsterdam. Hotel Tamara was and still is a one star hotel catering to Europeans, GIs on leave and young, impoverished students. Beds were slightly less than twin size metal frames with creaky springs supporting a thin cotton mattress, a



starched cotton sheet and a scratchy wool blanket. Rooms were small and there was a common bathroom on each floor with a tankless water heater. Hot water cost 2 Dutch nickels - somewhere around 2¢. During the week our job required one of us to sleep on the floor of the dining room and buzz people in when they rang the doorbell on the street one flight below. We made coffee in the morning and eggs and toast for anyone who showed up before 7:00 am. We got free room and board, also got a commission on all the beer we sold and could drink free on our watch.

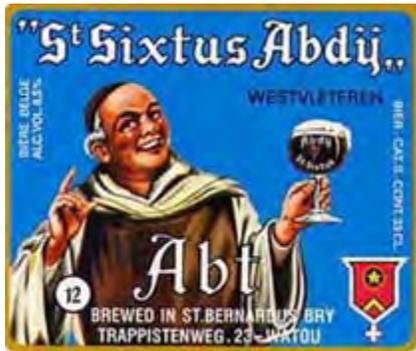
Don and I spent many an evening babysitting home sick GIs or guiding college kids to the trendy nightspots. Not a bad job for a 22 year old. One night on my watch I met Willi, a Bavarian farmer. I could tell. He had strong calloused hands and the body of someone familiar with hauling bales of hay around and working with heavy equipment. He had cows. And he had a naiveté about the world. He was my dad's age and size. The only time he had been out of Bavaria was World War II when he had been in the merchant marine. He had come to Amsterdam to practice his English. His wife had died recently and he had plans to go the US, get a Greyhound Ameripass, and travel the country while staying at Merchant Marine homes.

Willi's English sucked but then so did my German. We started out with my German-English dictionary on my watch and after a beer or two we both became more eloquent. It was a rainy December night on one of my free nights when Willi and I stumbled upon Café Belgique while wandering the alleys between Nieuwezidjs Voorburgwal and Damrak on an alley called Gravenstraat about 50 feet from Niewendijk. Straat in Dutch translates as street and it's clear someone once thought of it as a street but Gravenstraat's width is not much more than twice the distance of my outstretched arms. It's the smallest bar in Amsterdam with a handful of stools along the bar, sort of a banquette along one wall and 2 small tables. There was also a shelf along the window where those without a seat could rest their elbow, set their beer and find an ashtray for their cigarettes. Café Belgique can accommodate around a dozen people semi-comfortably. Since my first visit, they have placed 2 benches out front for smokers but not much else has changed. Café Belgique had a small toaster oven for food that would cause the

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lights to flicker when it was on. By the time I visited in the 80's they had changed out the toaster for something more functional. Café Belgique had 5 or 6 beers on tap and 50 bottled. By my visit in the 1990s, they had increased the taps to 8. Even today if you order one of the bottled beers the bartender must navigate the narrow stairway to the basement to retrieve your beer. The stairway is so narrow I would need to walk down it sideways. It was at Café Belgique that Willi and I had our first Belgian beer. The air hung heavy with the scent of wet wool and tobacco and I don't remember what we ordered but I was hooked. Over the next two months I would return frequently to Café Belgique – it is only 2 blocks from Hotel Tamara. After returning home, it would be almost 10 years before I could find another Belgian beer.



The beer was St. Sixtus and I found it on a lower shelf at Surdyks Liquor Store circa 1982. I remember it because of the funny monk on the label. The brewery at Watou brewed St. Sixtus under license for the monks at the St. Sixtus Abbey of Westvleteren. The Brewery and the Abby worked out an agreement in 1946 where the Abby's brewmaster brought his knowledge, recipes and yeast to the brewery at Watou to make St. Sixtus. The license expired in 1992 when the other Trappist monasteries decided that only beer brewed inside the walls of a Trappist monastery and brewed under

the direct supervision of a Trappist monk could be called Trappist. So the brewery at Watou changed the name of their beer to St. Bernardus to commemorate a former abbey on the site of the brewery and the Westvleteren Trappist monks resumed selling their beer at the abbey gate under the name

Westvleteren. St. Bernardus still brews with the original Westvleteren recipes and the original Westvleteren yeast. The monks, on the other hand, have used yeast from Westmalle, another Trappist monastery, since the early 1990s.

St. Bernardus Abt 12 clocks in at 10% alcohol by volume (abv) and is the same beer that sold until 1992 as the Trappist beer St. Sixtus 12 (compare the two labels). I have done taste comparisons between the St. Bernardus 12 and the Westvleteren 12 in Amsterdam where both beers were fresh and reasonably well handled and here in the US. I have tried blind tastings and reviewed other taste tests of the two beers. Several beer rankings have anointed Westvleteren 12 as the best beer in the world and it has attained true cult status. Despite the fact that a 750 ml (25.4 oz.) of St. Bernardus Abt 12 costs \$10 to \$12 and the Westvleteren 12, if you can get it, costs \$30 for



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one 33 cl (11.2 oz.) bottle, the St. Bernardus Abt 12 and the Westvleteren 12 in my tastings and in head to head competitions are pretty much tied. The last time I rated them blind, I had 750 ml and 33 cl bottles of the St. Bernardus Abt 12 and a 33cl of the Westvleteren 12. The 750 ml bottle won and the 33cl bottle of the Westvleteren just barely edged out the 33cl St. Bernardus. So costing 8.25 times less than what some have argued is the best beer in the world, I am quite happy with my St. Bernardus Abt 12 in the 750 ml bottle. It's a Belgian Quad, a big, potent, bold flavored beer. The big, heavy glass bottle allows the natural carbonation to build up to high levels without exploding the bottle. The cork pops as you remove it and a little white mist rises from the bottle. It decants brilliant chestnut topped with a clingy 2" mousse-like tan tinted white foam collar composed of very fine bubbles. The foam collar lasts several minutes and leaves gothic window lace. Prune, dried fig, raisin, fruit cake, and anise aromas rise from the glass. I find the flavors deeper and more nuanced than its more expensive cousin. The attack starts with prune and fig, a smidgen of dates then a hint of cocoa and caramel combining in flavors reminiscent of a very moist dark molasses brown sugar spice cake with most of the sweetness fermented out by the finish. Long lingering spice and dark sugar tastes coat the tongue for several minutes with some alcohol warming and pepper. St. Bernardus Abt 12's texture makes this beer. The creamy fine soft carbonation reminds me of being wrapped in a thick down comforter, giving your mouth an exquisite comfy feel. Its medium body is deceptively light for its size. This beer is a true classic.

I never learned if Willi made it to the US and survived. When he left Hotel Tamara I helped him with his bags, walked him to the train station – with a stop at Café Belgique – and never saw him again. I have been to Amsterdam several times since my first visit and Café Belgique is always there, little changed. It is on several best bars in Amsterdam lists but I can always find a stool. It always seems to find its way between where I am coming from and where I am going to so I stop there often. I treasure the place for introducing me to Belgian Beer. If you want a taste, anything with the smiling monk and St. Bernardus on the bottle is worth a try. Get the 750 ml bottle. It holds the amount of carbonation the brewer intended, lets the natural carbonation really shine and provides you with a truly classic drink. For me, the tap versions and the 33 cl bottle don't have the same carbonation and are not quite as good.