

## De Gouden Boom: Bruges Golden Brewery

by Jay Hersh with Joyce Miller

Bruges refers to itself as the "Venice of the North" a name it well deserves. This charming town in West Flanders, just a short drive west of Brussels, is built upon an island in the middle of the river Zwin. At one time a wall with entry gate towers ringed the city but now only a few of the original towers remain. Canals were built within the town over the years to provide the town with better port facilities to support its burgeoning trade. The facades of many of the buildings along its narrow streets date from the 15th century creating a charming old European feel. Some of Bruges main attractions include the 83 meter high Belfry tower (which possesses a magnificent carillon and clock dating from 1748) on the Markt (the main market square), the Town Hall (from 1376), and the Gruuthuse Museum (once the residence of a wealthy spice trader in the days when spices were used in beer instead of hops). While today Bruges is famous for lace, yet another reason to visit is beer. A tour of the De Gouden Boom Brewery was arranged thanks to the help of Bill and Nancy Erskine of International Beverages in Canton, Mass., importers of the range of De Gouden Boom products. Located at Langestraat 45, the brewery's history is a long one. The site dates to 1577 when it was a small inn called 't Hamerken (the Hammer). Over the years it had changed from a brewery to a gin distillery (Genever has been, and still is, a popular drink in Belgium), and functioned as such until 1872 when the first member of the Vanneste family (the present owners) took over. By 1879 it was converted back to a brewery, producing beers under the name 't Hamerken. At its height the brewery had 100 accounts purchasing the 't Hamerken pilsener beer named Triumph (so named for the Allies WWII victory) as well as lemonade, orange and pineapple drinks under the name SPITS. At one point just after WWII the brewery sent a letter to its accounts prohibiting them from selling Coca-Cola claiming it was bad for their customers health!

Even De Gouden Boom's name is steeped in history. In 1468 Duke Charles the Bold married Margaret of York, sister of King Edward IV of England. Since Margaret owned Flanders the marriage allowed Charles to acquire it. Among the festivities at the wedding celebration was a jousting tournament. This tournament, called the Festival of the Golden Tree, is now recreated every 5 years (next in 1996) and takes its name from the decorations at the wedding celebration; a tree with a gilded trunk, known in Flemish as De Gouden Boom. This name and motif have also become the brewery's symbols.

The present owner, Paul Vanneste, is the 4th generation of Vannestes to run the brewery. In 1983 he made a bold move, stopping the brewery's production, and selling the license to its accounts to another brewery called Van Acht. Later the same year he opened the De Gouden Boom brewery in the buildings of the former 't Hamerken brewery and introduced a new line of products.

De Gouden Boom offers four products, all top fermented. A Wit beer named Blanche de Bruges (aka Bruges Tarwebier), Brugse Tripel, and 2 Abbey beers under the name Steenbrugge, a Dubbel and a Tripel. The Abbey beers are named after the Bruges abbey founded by St. Arnoldus (the patron saint of Belgian Brewers). The brewery pays the Abbey a yearly royalty for the use of its name, and of course provides beer for the abbey. As at most Belgian breweries you will see a likeness of St. Arnoldus keeping guard over the brewing of the beer.

The beers are brewed from a variety of malts among them 2 row and 6 row Pils varieties from the Dingemans and the Huis maltings. The Blanche de Bruges also contains Brugge unmalted wheat. In addition the Steenbrugge Dubbel contains caramel and torrified malts. Hops are chosen from among varieties grown in the Poperinge region of Belgium, Styrian Goldings or British Kent

Goldings. This variety of ingredients allows the brewery to maintain a great degree of consistency in its products.

The brewery tour was conducted by the Commercial Manager, Mr. A. Louis Van Reeth and began in quite spectacular fashion, with a view into the boiling tank through a glass window in its side, which allows viewing of the boiling wort from the brewery control room. The brewery typically brews twice per day. After the boil the chilled beer is centrifuged in an impressive old copper to remove the trub. The boiling and fermentation tanks are 106.5bbls (125 Hl) in size. There are 6 fermentation tanks in total and these are cleaned automatically after their use.

De Gouden Boom uses two yeasts in all four of its products. The first is a fermenting yeast, the second is a bottling yeast. The wort is chilled to 64F, then moved to the fermenters. Except for the Wit beer the products are centrifuged to aid clarification, then filtered prior to bottling.

After the tour Mr. Van Reeth proceeded to the very impressive brewery museum located in 2 rooms on the upper floors of the brewery. The museum (open for public tours from May 1st to October via an entrance separate from the brewery itself) contains a number of interesting artifacts from the history of brewing in both Belgium and Bruges. Bottling machines from various eras, bottle capping mechanisms, breweriana (beer trays and the like) from the 't Hamerken brewery, old cooperage equipment, wooden shoes (which the brewers used to wear in the brewhouse), as well as photos of the Vanneste family. It also contained the brewery tasting room.

At this point in the tour Mr. Vanneste arrived and proudly led a tasting of his brewery's fine products beginning with the very refreshing Blanche de Bruges (aka Bruges Tarwebier), past the hearty Steenbrugge Dubbel and Tripel, and finishing with the excellent Brugse Tripel (my favorite). On the way out he pointed out a few things that help summarize the attitude of De Gouden Boom's staff and that of the people of Bruges. The brewery's foundation and facade, dating from the 1600s, are being renovated under the guidance of a specialist from the Bruges town government. The specialist's job is to assist residents and businesses in excavating any important archeological artifacts from the sites, and to preserve the historic architectural quality of Bruges' buildings. While this costs the brewery more, it is an expense they gladly pay to preserve their heritage. The second thing Mr. Vanneste pointed out was the inscription on his family's house just a few doors down from the brewery. The English translation means "East, West, Home is best, Every bird praises its nest." In Flemish the final line is a play upon the family name "Vanneste."

Mr. Vanneste and the staff of the De Gouden Boom brewery exhibit much pride. Pride in the family heritage of the De Gouden Boom brewery, pride in the history of Bruges, and pride in the quality of their fine products. This pride is well deserved, few places are as charming as Bruges, and few years as enjoyable as those from De Gouden Boom.

#### Where to Drink in Bruges

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De Gouden Boom Brewery Museum and Tap, Langestraat 45 050/33.06.99  
open for public tours during summer months, call ahead for hours

Straffe Hendrik Brewery Tavern, Walplein 26, 050/33.26.97  
open daytime, closed in the evenings

't Burges Beertje, Kemelstraat 5, near Simon Stevin Plein, 050/33.96.16  
small bar with an excellent selection and knowledgeable staff

Staminee de Garre, De Garre 1, a tiny alley off of Briedelstraat just  
between the Markt Square and the Town Hall. Look for a wooden barrel  
at the alley entrance. Quaint old pub with a nice selection.

't Hoefijzerte, Walplein 12, 050/33.06.04  
nice cafe, with reasonable food and a small bottle and gift shop with glassware