

Oktoberfest is a style which most beer drinkers are familiar with but few understand the complex origin of the style. Recently beers have appeared on the market with confusing nomenclature such as the Oktoberfest-Maerzen designation appearing on this past year's offering from Hacker-Pschorr, or Spaten's Urmaerzen among others. This leads the drinker to question what exactly is a Maerzen, and what does it have to do with Oktoberfest? In this article we will answer this question, and while we are at it also discuss the related style of Vienna which can still be found today, although not always under that name.

The roots of modern Oktoberfest begin in Bavaria with a traditional Fall harvest festival known as Ernte Danke, which literally means harvest thanks. This was a festival in which the Fall harvest was celebrated both with religious ceremony as well as food and drink. This festival was also critical to brewers as it typically marked the close of the farming season and the beginning of the brewing season in a time when most brewers were farmers during the summer, and brewers in the winter. This practice owes itself not just to seasonal rhythms, but also to a legislative fiat that began in the middle of the 16th century and prohibited brewing during the summer months, typically late April to late September.

So how is this seasonal practice the cause of confusing nomenclature? Well it was not simply that brewing was prohibited during summer months, but that because it was prohibited the brewers needed to brew more beer in the months before the summer so that there would be ample supplies of beer available for sale during the summer months. This brewing occurred in March, or Maerzen as it is known in German and hence the name for beers consumed during the summer months and especially at the Ernte Danke festivals. This beer was also referred to as Summer beer in many older texts owing to when it was intended for use.

The city of Munich had in fact a rather complicated system for controlling the distribution of beer during these summer months. A lottery system was employed to determine the order in which each brewery got to sell its beer. The summer was divided into two halves, and in each half only one brewery at a time was given the right to sell its products. This system was enacted as a means to preserve economic order, and ensure a continued beer supply of reasonable quality throughout the summer months. This protected against the tendency for the brewers to price competitively and sell their best products first leaving only lesser quality products, or none at all, to remain in late summer. As history documents more than one riot over beer such a system was important to keeping order.

Additionally the sale of summer beer was not allowed to begin until all the winter beer had been consumed. Conversely the brewing of Winter beer could not commence until the summer beer was disposed of. One can thus see how the roots of many festivals, especially the formalized Oktoberfest (officially begun as the wedding celebration of King Ludwig I), could develop from such a seasonal regulation of brewing as the brewing of winter beer could not commence until the summer beer had been sold off, and therefore there was much incentive to empty the kegs at the start of the brewing season.

In the days before the Oktoberfest festival, Maerzen beer could actually be any style. Many old brewing texts however typically described it as being brewed with more barley and hops than the typical winter beers. The Oktoberfest festival itself was actually begun in 1810 and so for more than its first 1/2 century the beers served at it were most likely referred to as Maerzen more than any other name. The name Oktoberfest may have been used to describe beer sold at the festival but is believed not to have actually referred to a specific style itself until 1872 when the Leist brewery (run by a cousin of Gabriel Sedlmayer of the famous Spaten brewery and later merged with it) introduced an amber colored beer at the festival brewed in the style of the famous beers brewed in Vienna at that time. The beer was called Franziskaner Urmaerzen (original March) Other breweries followed suit and this style was quickly adopted as the Weis'n beer (Wies'n means meadow and refers to the site of the Oktoberfest the Therese Wies'n aka Therese's meadow after the name of Ludwig's bride).

The Munich brewers became proud of the reputation of the beer style they developed for their festival and chose to guard it closely. Thus it was that the name Oktoberfest, which has come to be associated with the specific malty amber beer served each year at the festival has now become a reserved designation (appellation controlle is the term used among wine drinkers), and only beers brewed within the city limits of

Munich can use that term if they are sold in Germany. Outside Germany the name is freely used. Other brewers within Germany, such as Prince Luitpold who runs the Kaltenberg brewery just outside of Munich, and is ironically the direct descendant of King Ludwig I, must resort to using different names when describing their Oktoberfest style beers. Hence the use of the term Maerzen by some breweries, and even the old name for the festival, Ernte Danke, used by Kaltenberg, have come to be used to describe beers brewed in this style.

So what of the Vienna style? As mentioned earlier, in developing their special beer for the Oktoberfest the Leist brewery had the very specific goal in mind of emulating the widely respected products produced at the Vienna brewery of Anton Dreher called the Kleiner Schwechat. Dreher began his brewery in the 1840s and helped develop the ascendancy of Lager beer brewing along with his contemporary Sedlmayer of Spaten. By the 1870s the amber beer style Dreher had chosen to brew was widely renowned across Europe. When Austrian brewers began emigrating to the new world they took their brewing skills with them. Thus it occurred that these immigrants settling in the Southwestern portion of the then United States and Mexico brought this style with them. While brewing of this style was interrupted in the U.S. and the style itself lost popularity in Europe against the Pilsner style (which began about the same time as the Vienna style) brewing of this style remained relatively uninterrupted in Mexico. Thus it is that beers with names such as Dos Equis or Negra Modelo can be found today and exemplify the Vienna style.

So next time you are shopping for a beer remember there is more to a name than meets the eye. When a brewer chooses a name they hopefully do so not simply to capitalize on a trend, but ideally to convey to the customer information about both what the beer will taste like and the history behind how the name and taste have become associated.