



Photos: La Barbaude brewery in Nîmes

# BREWING BEER in wine country

Going for a cold one in Provence? At first glance, it sounds about as likely as ordering wine at a Canadian pub during hockey season. However, a small but growing group of artisanal brewers in the region have been looking to change that.

**J**ean-Marc Raffner, founder of La Brasserie Artisanale du Sud in Nyons, explains that at the turn of the last century, there were nearly 100 small-scale breweries scattered across the south. By the 1990s they had all closed, victims first of the economic downturn caused by two wars and then the growth of the wine industry and industrial brewing.

“During the wars, fermentation tanks were melted down to make artillery,” explains Bastien Collomp, co-founder of La Barbaude brewery in Nîmes. “Then we had a phase where the smaller breweries were bought by big breweries. Now people consume less beer but want better quality.” Raffner says his own brewery, founded in 2001, was the first of several in a regional revival. “It was the result of some work I was doing, collaborating with a gentleman who was writing a book on the beers of France.” “France has always been known for the beers of

the North and of Alsace,” he says in articulate and eager English. “But we discovered that all the breweries that there had been in the South had disappeared so we decided to do a revival.”

The revival caught. An independent directory of breweries, *Bière France*, lists 15 breweries in Languedoc-Rousillon. Too new to even be included in the *Bière France* directory is La Barbaude Brasserie, founded seven months ago by Bastien Collomp and his brother Mathieu. Bastien says the brothers used home-brewing equipment for several years before moving their operation into a refurbished warehouse under the train station arches in downtown Nîmes. The brothers left their jobs to pursue a passion in the uncertain world of small business. “I was a special education teacher and my brother was in IT,” says Bastien. “We started brewing because we wanted good beer, not industrial beer.” The brewery is a two-man operation.

“We do the accounting, the production, the sales, the farmers’ markets, the delivery, everything,” says Bastien. “We put in a lot of hours. But I’m proud of everything we do.”

“To start with grain and then transform it, that’s what fascinates me,” he says, explaining the brewing process, which takes several weeks. “We brew in winter. We roast the grain – the least roasted grain gives us blonde, then we have amber and so forth. Then we humidify the grain to get the malt, which allows us to change starch into sugar. The mixture is then heated and boiled, and various ingredients are added depending on the recipe. We add hops to make it bitter, and that’s also where we can add things like orange, coriander, ginger or whatever we want,” he explains. “That’s what the two

of us love most, creating recipes.” The mixture is cooled, left to ferment for a week, then put into bottles with yeast and sugar. “The yeast eats the sugar and that’s how you get the bubbles and the alcohol.” The mixture is then poured into thousand-litre tanks and left to ferment two more weeks before being packed and bottled. Even the bottles are labelled and filled in the Collomps’ workshop.

*Bière des Gardians*, based on a rice farm in rural Camargue and brewed in a partnership with Raffner’s Brasserie Artisanale, is another local label that just got off the ground. “You must have been one of the first readers of the website,” says co-founder Jacques Rozière. His beer, which only came on the market in November 2011, adds Camargue rice to the barley and hops for a special local touch.

“It was a really original idea, almost a crazy idea, because we’ve been growing rice here for generations, but no one thought of doing beer,” says Rozière, a dedicated rice farmer who plans his vacations to rice-growing regions of the world. “I saw rice beers in Thailand and Vietnam and thought, ‘Why not here?’” He and a few friends bought home-brewing equipment and attended a beer-brewing workshop, but “quickly figured out it was too complicated and we needed a professional.” Rozière contacted Raffner, who was quite interested. “He said, ‘Funny you should ask, I’ve dreamed of doing (rice beer) but no one

has ever asked me about it.’” Rozière recalled. The rest is recent history, as the first professionally brewed batch of *Bière des Gardians* sold out within hours at a trade fair in November 2011. “We had nothing at all left by the end of the day. Now we’re just waiting for summer.”

“Here, we don’t drink beer with meals. You drink beer when you’re thirsty; it’s a summer drink. You don’t want it to have a nine per cent alcohol content, and you don’t want it to be too sweet. Those were our three criteria - low alcohol content, not too sweet and not too bitter. There’s even a visual aspect to it; you want it to catch the sunlight.”

The local beers we tried are definitely there for drinking on a sun-soaked terrace. Even the darker brews are relatively light, bubbly and easy to drink - no chocolate-syrup stout here. La Barbaude rousse with raspberries and licorice lager are definitely worth remembering for those summer house parties, and with the *Bière des Gardians* lager we could practically feel the summer sun on our faces. “You don’t really smell or taste the rice; it’s a beer above all,” says Rozière.

Waiting for summer, indeed!

Ruby Pratka

**Summer is peak beer-drinking season in this part of the world. A beer developed for the southern market is necessarily lighter than one you might find in Alsace, or in Britain for that matter.**



L'abus d'alcool est dangereux pour la santé