



AMBER MAGIC

Something's brewing in Denmark, and it's not only Carlsberg. Craft beers are pouring out of microbreweries across the country as the wizards of malt transform the national beverage. Scanorama goes on a cask crawl

Words by JAN FRIMODT *Photographs by* ROBIN SKJOLDBORG

Those who buy into the ads saying Carlsberg is “probably the best beer in the world” should go on a tour of Danish microbreweries. These magical houses of malt are pumping out a range of beers unheard of just 10 years ago.

There are pilsners that leave ordinary Carlsberg lagers so far behind it's as if the ad truck never left the garage.

Pleasingly bitter India pale ales that linger long in the mouth, packed as they are with enough hops to endure a trip round the Cape to India.

A unique red ale with the subtle taste of sweet gale (aka bog myrtle) locally picked by the brewer himself, of course.

And even a Chili Triple that smells like you'd expect, but goes down smooth and sweet – at first.

All over this country of 5.5 million people, where the average Dane drinks 90 liters of beer a year, more than 100 microbreweries have shot up during the past decade. Even Carlsberg has risen to the challenge with its Semper Ardens and Jacobsen beers.

Since 1999, the independent consumer organization Danske Ølentusiaster (Danish Beer Enthusiasts) has awarded the “New Beer of the Year.” In 2009, 604 entries from 108 breweries competed for the title.

To beer lovers, all this is a fairy-tale come true.

What's more, microbrewing is not just a Copenhagen thing. It's spread nationwide.

IN THE NORTH ZEALAND TOWN of Hundested, just an hour's drive from Copenhagen, sailing and fishing boats huddle peacefully in the harbor. One boat has done a *Speed 2* imitation: plowed its hull onto the shore and a little more than halfway into a waterfront building: the brewery, café and bar Halsnæs Bryghus.

The immaculate teak deck of the classic Folkebåd sailboat acts as bar inside the café as well as outside in the courtyard. Inside, house products are on tap – more the exception than the rule when it comes to microbreweries.

Just as immaculate are the slatted wooden casings surrounding the brewing tanks that are visible in one corner of the café. They are the handiwork of 33-year-old Peter Sonne, a furniture maker turned brewer, café director and investor. ▶

Castles made of sand: One of the houses that seem to grow from the dunes on the wild and windy Danish west coast not far from Varde and Warwik Bryghus





On tap: The beers at Halsnæs Bryghus are poured rather than opened – at least in the café



Raw ingredients: Bags of Belgian malt left for the alchemists at Midtfyns Bryghus



Jack-of-all-trades: Furniture maker turned brewer and café director Peter Sonne has even made the slatted wooden casings for Halsnæs Bryghus's brewing tanks

His eyes light up when he talks about his beer. “Our Store Knud will never win a prize, but it gets a lot of praise,” he says of the Czech-inspired pilsner brewed with lots of hops for a sharp, bitter edge.

Store Knud is made with Czech hops. Sonne tested 25 different hops by adding each one to a test tube of vodka – a neutral spirit that lends itself to flavoring – letting the hops settle and then tasting what they’d done to the vodka.

Sonne and nine other local businessmen founded Halsnæs Bryghus in 2008. Additional financing was raised by selling so-called B shares, which in Denmark does not require the company to be listed on the stock exchange. Halsnæs acquired its 600 liter-a-batch brewing equipment from a microbrewery that went belly up. Not state of the art, more like an old girl who needs to be tickled, Sonne says.

He must be good at tickling I think to myself as I dip my nose into a glass of Poulsen, a red ale smelling of sweet gale. Sonne picks the herb himself and gets supplies from botanizing café guests. The taste is fruity sweet: perfectly balanced, long aftertaste, the 6% alcohol content totally subdued.

No visit to Halsnæs is complete without a glass of Vådbinder, named for the dragnet makers who practiced their craft on the roof of the building.

DRIVING NORTHWEST FROM HUNDESTED, I spend the night at Helenekilde Badehotel, a charming place with 27 newly renovated rooms. It sits high above the sea in the lazy summer town of Tisvildeleje. From the terraces and most of the rooms, there’s an unobstructed view of the ocean as well as up and down the coastline, where luxury summer residences are privately nestled in wooded areas above the cliffs.

Heading south from the coast, farms replace the lazy summer towns. It’s pleasant green countryside except for the occasional bright yellow rapeseed field. Here and there, a few of the windmills that produce a quarter of all Danish electricity tower white above the green.

Even from the country road leading to the Fuglebjerggaard farm, I can see vines of hops climbing their 15ft-high espaliers. Fuglebjerggaard is owned – and its organic fruit, vegetables, herbs and corn farmed – by TV food show personality Camilla Plum and her husband, Per Kølster.

Kølster sees himself as a farmer first, a brewer

second, but admits: “In the brewery, that’s where my heart really starts pounding. Just like when I do experimental brews with the guys.”

Turns out the guys were here the night before. I happen to know some of them. They’re “base-ment brewers,” but they make quality beer. There was enough testing and tasting for Kølster to suggest coffee instead of one of his brews. Damn.

On the other hand, you don’t just open the bottles he uses for his beers – 75cl champagne bottles with corks, wiring, the lot – and pour the contents down your throat.

Kølster, 56, is tanned and trim. Despite the shortly cropped graying hair, he could pass for 45. His hair was a mile longer in 1975, when he worked on a farm in France during what turned out to be his summer of love. Beer love, that is.

When a Belgian worker had visitors from home, he would get beer in small, unlabeled bottles. Kølster shared the contents of one under quasi-religious circumstances quite different from how he normally swilled his lager.

“The enjoyment – ‘cause that’s what it was – would have suited vintage wine or whiskey better. And the taste: big, strong and spicy, something I’d never encountered before. One of my life’s beerological highs.”

After 10 years of biology research and teaching at the university of Copenhagen, where Kølster felt organic farming was sadly downplayed, he got the chance to do his own thing when he and

Camilla bought Fuglebjerggaard in 1996.

Kølster’s beers are individually named and consecutively numbered. The first 13 were brewed in the family kitchen where Camilla’s TV shows are now shot. Since fall 2005, 500 liter batches are brewed in an old henhouse. The beers ferment and mature in tall 200 liter stoneware jars, continue to ferment in champagne bottles, and are ready to drink in 7 to 10 weeks.

The process of turning barley grain into malt includes sprouting, cooking, cooling and drying. Control of the amounts used, the temperatures involved and the time taken is vital. Since his No.8 from 2004, Kølster is the only brewer in the world who produces his own malt, grows his own hops and puts both in his beer.

Last year, he arranged a tasting of 38 test beers. He made them with the same amount and type of hops, yeast and water, but the type of malt in each ▶

COMPARING LAGERS

In contrast to a “reference” Carlsberg lager, both Store Knud from Halsnæs and Frk. Friis from Warwik are unfiltered and unpasteurized. This makes them less clear and darker in color. Their smell is marginally different from the Carlsberg and both give off a dry, prickly sensation in the mouth. That’s from the hops, a taste that lingers. On top of this, Frk. Friis has a slightly sweet, pleasant aftertaste. Still, the dry, prickly sensation is even stronger and longer lasting in my old favorite, the Czech Urquell. The alcohol content in each of these is just under 5%.

HEADING SOUTH FROM THE COAST, FARMS REPLACE THE LAZY SUMMER TOWNS. IT’S PLEASANT GREEN COUNTRYSIDE EXCEPT FOR THE OCCASIONAL BRIGHT YELLOW RAPESEED FIELD. HERE AND THERE, WINDMILLS TOWER WHITE ABOVE THE GREEN



Labor of love: Per Kolster is a farmer first, brewer second. He's the only brewer in the world to produce his own malt, grow his own hops, and put both in his beer



Country pursuit: Trees and lilac bushes flank the road to Midtfyns Bryghus in scenic Svanninge Bakker



one was different. I sat in on this malt-o-mania along with people from other microbreweries, beer experts, barley growers and even two of the “guys.” The difference in taste between some of the brews was astounding.

Kølster's beers are sold only in Fuglebjerggaard's shop. The prices vary from \$12 to \$20, reflecting the amount of work, especially the malt production, put into the beers.

I take home a No.100 Kulsvier and a No.102 Bejler. The latter means suitor in Danish; Kølster brewed it for his son's wedding reception. It's a fine tasting fresh beer that gets its reddish color from the Wiener-type malt used, and, at 5%, it's a perfect summer beer.

Good party, I should think.

THE DRIVE FROM COPENHAGEN to Odense, Funen's main city, is a cinch thanks to the Storebælt bridge.

Toward Faaborg undulating hills start to appear in Svanninge Bakker. Dense rows of 10ft-tall white or purple lilacs flank the country roads. Here, too, there seem to be windmills everywhere you look and signs advertising fresh potatoes and strawberries.

In the small thatched-roof town of Falsled, Lene and Sven Grønlykke opened a hotel and gourmet restaurant in 1971. A highly unusual move at a time when Danes couldn't spell sauce or foie gras, and the name Michelin was associated only with radials.

The Grønlykkes leased the place to French chef Jean-Louis Liefroy and his Danish wife, Ellen, who over the next four decades established Falsled Kro as the culinary place to crash, the food generally known as the best outside Copenhagen. They quit last year – quite an act to follow for newcomers Randi Schmidt and Per Hallundbæk.

“We were aware of that, of course. The buildings are protected, so we couldn't change a lot on the hotel side even if we wanted to. In the restaurant, however, we're attempting to establish a more relaxed atmosphere,” says hotel manager Randi Schmidt.

But still, not a beer in sight.

That doesn't stop me from tucking into the six-course menu, though. The white asparagus is as thick as the plank it comes on, soft and juicy, but still with bite. The meat course is simple: two slices of deer served with a delicately fried head of cauliflower and a wonderful sauce of musty cherries.

The high point is a French-Danish pairing:

warm oysters from Marennes-Oléron and pickled carrots from Funen.

Breakfast at Falsled Kro, Denmark's only Relais & Châteaux member, is another inventive extravaganza. There's birch syrup in the yogurt, juice made from sea buckthorn berries, and doll-sized fried quail eggs.

FROM FALSLED IT'S A SHORT DRIVE to Brobyværk, where American Eddie Szweda, 49, and his Danish wife bought Midtøns Bryghus four years ago. She stayed a lecturer, while Szweda swapped his well paid IT job for a hardly at all paid 60 hours-a-week position as director/marketing manager/administrator.

“Nothing comes for free. It's been hard work and dedication, and last year we actually came out with a small profit,” Szweda says.

He doesn't make the beer – brewers Jan Jensen and Jacob Mikkelsen are in charge of that. He pours his energy into marketing and selling.

“A small company like ours has to make sure that beer drinkers get to know our products by tasting them. Being on the shelves of some big supermarket chain is not enough. The customer also needs to know and recognize the product,” Szweda says.

So, niche marketing it is. Last year, Midtøns Bryghus introduced a beer for the blind. The label is in braille, and a percentage of the sales goes to the Danish Association of the Blind.

The 2,000 Danish fans of the English soccer club Arsenal have their own Gunners Ale, which is sold through the fan club and at

pubs where they watch televised Arsenal games. For this summer's World Cup, Szweda teamed up with Jørgen Fogh Rasmussen, owner of the Hornbeer microbrewery and brother of ex-Danish PM Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Together, they marketed an Imperial IPA called Gladiator to emulate old Roman traditions with Szweda and Rasmussen in the combatant roles or even – a solemn wish at the time – the United States vs Denmark in a World Cup semifinal.

Already in 2007, niche marketing led to broad recognition when Ølentusiasterne awarded Midtøns Bryghus's Imperial Stout “New Beer of the Year” from 556 candidates. Last year, its 9.2% Chili Triple duplicated the feat.

True to its name, the Chili Triple smells spicy. But when you drink it, the taste is smooth and at first surprisingly sweet. Then the spices come through. What an amazing blend.



Dark arts: Kølster's beers are individually named and consecutively numbered. Lyse Nætter means “bright nights”

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COMPARING THE DARK STUFF

Halsnæs Bryghus's Vådbinder (7.6%) is a porter, black and sweet with wonderful tones of dark chocolate and coffee. It's not too sweet, though, with quite a bit of hops to counter the sweetness. The smoked malts help, too – as does a whiff of tar. Midtøns Bryghus's De Molen beer has a creamy head of foam and is extremely smooth in the mouth. A pleasant smoky taste and a bit of licorice is plenty to subdue the alcohol content (8%). Per Kølster's No.100 Kulsvier is up there with both of them at 8.7%, with a thick head of long-lasting foam. Twenty types of malt give a lot of different flavors, with roasted coffee the most prominent.



Brand building: Eddie Szweda's niche marketing strategies are paying off for Midtfyns Bryghus, which has beers for the blind and Arsenal fans

Like Halsnæs, Midtfyns Bryghus is bringing in extra financing by selling B shares. Another common concept among microbreweries is “guest brewing.”

“We do it to support and promote craft brewing in Denmark,” Szweda says. “Plus, we get a feeling for what goes on out there.”

Basically, it's like aspiring rock musicians sending demos to a recording company. A few are invited to brew their recipe at the micro. Their brew ends up in Midtfyns bottles, their name on the shared label.

“This one you gotta try,” says Szweda expectantly, and pours me something dark and dangerous. It's the result of Midtfyns' collaboration with De Molen Brewery in The Netherlands. Together, they brewed 2,300 liters. A third of the batch was “aged” by submerging a net containing chips from cut up oak casks in the brew for a week.

The glass I get is from the other two-thirds, but going Dutch has never been better.

ACROSS THE LILLEBÆLT BRIDGE and westward toward Esbjerg, the E20 is pretty straight. From 1864 until 1920, the land south of this line belonged to Germany – except Ribe, Denmark's oldest town, which celebrates its 1,300th birthday this year.

Restaurant Kolvig sits on the banks of the river

Ribe. I stop for a plate of *Vadehavstapas* (Wadden Sea tapas) with delicacies such as *ffjordrejer* (small shrimps), *jomfruhummere* (langoustines), scallops and pesto with a hint of sharp-tasting ramp. There's beer to go with it, of course, a *blonde* from Ribe Bryghus.

On the outskirts of Varde, 20km north of Esbjerg, I meet Mikael Chen Langager, the head of the import and distribution company Beer Factory, in a warehouse packed with pallets of beer. Danish microbrewers used to have trouble getting their bottles distributed and returned. That situation has improved thanks to Beer Factory.

The importing side of the business started eight years ago as a hobby, bringing home small quantities of German, Belgian and Czech beer. At that time, Langager was CEO of a small railway company. A couple of years later, he joined forces with home brewer Søren Jensen – “he had a burning interest in railways, I had a burning interest in beer,” Langager recalls – and along with five others, they established the microbrewery Warwik Bryghus as a cooperative.

Two years ago, Langager quit the railway for what he describes as a lot less pay and much longer hours divided between Beer Factory's import/distribution, which now includes malts, and Warwik's brewing.



Dark and dangerous: Midtfyns Bryghus's De Molen beer

BREWERIES

Halsnæs Bryghus
Nordre Beddingsvej 35,
Hundested.
Tel: +45 26 16 70 46.
www.halsnaesbryghus.dk

Fuglebjerggaard
Hemmingstrupvej 8,
Helsingø.
Tel: +45 24 25 39 70.
www.fuglebjerggaard.dk

Midtfyns Bryghus
Marsk Billesvej 24,
Brobyværk, Broby.
Tel: +45 63 90 88 80.
www.midtfyns-bryghus.dk

Warwik Bryghus
Vestervold 18B, Varde.
Tel: +45 60 29 70 36.
www.warwik.dk

HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS

**Helenekilde
Badehotel**
Strandvejen 25,
Tisvildeleje.
Tel: +45 48 70 70 01.
Doubles from \$185,
including breakfast.
www.helenekilde.com

Falsled Kro
Assensvej 513,
Falsled, Millinge.
Tel: +45 62 68 11 11.
Doubles from \$300.
www.falsledkro.dk

Restaurant Kolvig
Mellemdammen 13,
Ribe.
Tel: +45 75 41 04 88.
www.kolvig.dk



Beer tasting: Søren Jensen samples his own goods



Scenic route: Ribe, Denmark's oldest town, has a past every bit as colorful as the names of nearby Warwik Bryghus's beers, which are taken from local historic figures, among them councillor Frk. Friis

For lunch, we relocate to the Big Ben pub in downtown Varde. Langager's cell hardly stops ringing. Fjordens Bryghus needs more malt. The store at Schackenborg, Prince Joachim's castle and farm, needs more Warwik.

The pub serves Warwik beers, of course. I lean into a bottle of Lause, a German-type *schwarzbiere* (black beer). The foam is not that thick, but long lasting, the aroma faintly sweet and nutty. Going in there's not much taste, but as I swill and swallow the sweetness appears. That's from the dark roasted malts.

Lause (6.1%) is really a *schwarzbock*. Like all Warwik beers, it's named for a local historic figure. Johannes "Lause" Lauridsen owned a transport company and conducted most of his business from a bar. Today that bar is called Laustuen. It's run by his grandchildren and situated right next to Big Ben. Similarly, the name Frk. Friis comes from a conservative city council member known for her stern manner. Warwik is the ancient name for Varde.

The actual brewery is standing room only, crammed as it is with tanks and an old-school do-it-yourself bottling device that can only transfer each 800 liter batch one bottle at a time.

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Even Warwik welcomes guest brewers. The brewery obtains extra financing by selling shares in the cooperative, about 230 so far. On Friday afternoons, shareholders get together and drink "their" beer in the private bar next to the brewery.

Letting other brewers use your equipment, small-scale local financing and consuming your own product – all this is typical of the somewhat idealistic, not-too-commercial spirit that pervades Danish microbrewing. So is the fact that Langager continues to distribute an increasing number of other micros' products with one hand as he stirs the brews at Warwik with the other.

Midtfyns Bryghus's slogan is "We don't make one beer that everybody likes!"

Like most Danish micros, they may be in it for the money but they're certainly in it for the beer. ♦