

Beer History: Lost in Poland, Grodziskie Bubbles Up in the US

LISA GRIMM



Wheat beers have a long history in what is now Poland, but the traditional style was rather different from the more familiar German hefeweizen—the Polish beer involved a lot of smoke. Originating in the town of Grodzisk, Grodziskie (also known as Grätzer in German) was once quite popular across the region, from as far back as the 14th century (and probably earlier) until the mid-1990s, when the last commercial brewer of the style was purchased by a rival and silenced.

Grodziskie was viewed as a unique local product from its earliest historical mentions—in a work from 1470, Polish priest and historian Jan Długosz described the beer's ingredients—simply wheat, hops and water—and he seems to have considered it something of a national drink.

Indeed, unlike some traditional beer styles, it was not just a commoner's drink—upon hearing that Polish wheat beers were not available in Austria, Konrad, Prince Bishop of Kujawy, turned down the Archbishop of Salzburg post in 1303. Konrad was not the only clergyman fan of Grodziskie, however; legend holds that in the 16th century, a monk called Bernard of Wąbrzeźno blessed a well that had gone dry—his effort worked, the water returned, and the brewers were able to resume work—for centuries, kegs of beer were left at his grave in thanks.

Beyond the absence of barley in its makeup, Grodziskie's other unusual element was that the wheat malt had been smoked, usually over oak, before brewing. Over time, it became known as a smoky, yet refreshing and slightly tart beer. The style was still well-known beyond Poland—an early 20th century American magazine described it as "A durable top-fermentation beer, made from wheat malt, dried on a smoke kiln, in the smoke of oak-wood and which, for this reason, has a smoky flavor." Enjoying a glass of Grodziskie on a hot day was also mentioned as a usual part of a holiday to the region in a late 19th century travel guide.

But politics, war and industrial brewing spelled the end for Poland's indigenous beer—although it nearly made it to the end of the 20th century and there are occasional rumors of its impending revival in its homeland, there are (at

present) [no commercial brewers](#) of Grodziskie in Poland.

But while the style is dormant in Poland, it has begun to re-awaken in the US, despite one major stumbling block: it is essentially impossible for brewers to buy smoked wheat malt, much less oak-smoked malt. However, a little creativity in the recipe department and a willingness to spend some not-inconsiderable time with an industrial smoker can go a long way.

In Philadelphia, [Yards Brewing Company](#) and [Iron Hill Brewery](#) collaborated on the what was very likely the first commercially-brewed Grodziskie in America [for the inaugural Philly Beer Week in 2009](#). The beer was well-received and is set to make re-appearances as an occasional beer—Steve Mashington of Yards confirms that it will be at their next ['Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em](#) event.

New York's [Blind Bat Brewery](#) has their own take on the style with their [Old Walt Smoke Wit](#)—rather than going for oak, they smoke their malt over mesquite, making it a very American variation on the style. They also produce [Vlad the Inhaler](#), which is much closer to a traditional Grodziskie, oak-smoke and all. In New England, [Notch also brewed a Grodziskie](#), and they are looking to continue experimenting with the style.

Perhaps it's time for a Polish brewer to give Grodziskie another chance.