

Springtime Beer History: Biere de Mars

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While many beer fans are aware that Germany's doppelbocks were originally brewed to help medieval monks get through Lent, another traditional spring style gets a bit less press: France's Bière de Mars. A variation on a Bière de Garde and a not-too-distant relation of Belgium's saisons, this beer was traditionally made by French farmers in late winter or spring for relatively quick consumption—the 'Mars' in the name refers to the month of March.

In contrast to Germany's monastic tradition, this particular stripe of French brewing originated at the household level. While the south of France was busy producing grapes and making wine, more northerly areas, in concert with their Belgian neighbors (and occasionally countrymen, depending on who oversaw which bit of land and when), made beer.

Tasting examples of both styles side by side is one clue suggesting that Bière de Garde is indeed closely related to Belgium's saison; the styles share both a [similar agricultural origin](#) and a French-speaking background. Both types of beer were originally brewed for thirsty farmworkers, so a reasonably malty, though dry, and probably lower-alcohol beer was usually the result.

Another characteristic both beers share is that they were typically cellared—Bière de Garde translates as 'beer for keeping'—and consumed some months after they were initially produced, so there is also a relationship with Germany's lagers. Indeed, in the middle of the 19th century, [a technical dictionary](#) of the period suggests that Bière de Garde, Bière de Mars, and Das Lagerbier were all useful synonyms for 'Blink' beer—a term one is unlikely to come across in modern usage. While the Belgian connections are widely acknowledged today, it would seem that some reference to German lager traditions may also come into play—especially given the frequency with which commercial examples of Bière de Mars from Strasbourg are mentioned in pre-20th century texts—and Germany was right across the river (much of the time).

But what makes the springtime version of Bière de Garde so unique? While originally brewed for consumption in March (before the heat of the summer made brewing a riskier proposition), it seems that the seasonal aspect of Bière de Mars was already something of a memory before the advent of refrigeration. The beer's reputation was

firmly established beyond France by the 19th century, and it had become popular—and occasionally sneer-worthy—with the traveling set. Even an otherwise matter-of-fact British publication on trade laws and taxation, originally published in the 1840s, enthused about the beer of the Nord-Pas de Calais region :

Beer is brewed at all seasons in France, but that made in the month of March ("Biere de Mars") is the most esteemed."

Medical journals of the period also suggested that visitors to the Strasbourg area seek out Bière de Mars (as well as still-familiar names like 'bock-bier' and 'Lambick'), for both health and leisure purposes, while many travel guides also supported this notion. Biere de Mars even developed its own lore, garnering an association with Napoleon that seems to have come about via a bit of (fancy) folk etymology—classically-educated British visitors asserted, often in jest, that 'mars' referred to the god of war and that the beer fueled the army before battles, while the direct (and less romantic) French-to-English translation of 'March' was overlooked.

Beyond the name games, any modern beer fan knows that popularity can breed contempt in certain corners, and later Victorian writers such as George Augustus Sala, a well-known journalist who wrote for both Charles Dickens's and William Makepeace Thackeray's publications, was glad to escape Strasbourg '...and Biere de Mars abominations' for 'very good' German beer, while on this side of the Atlantic, the beer was slated as '...a countrified beer...known under the pompous name of biere de Mars' and did not seem to be highly recommended by Stoddard Dewey, a frequent correspondent on Things French.

History was not kind to the style either, as the early 20th century saw the demise of many of the smaller producers—with the small matter of two world wars and the rise of mass-produced lager, it's not surprising that only a few producers remained by the latter part of the century.

But the style has had a healthy, if small, revival, both in France and beyond. In America, Southampton Publick House features one of the most well-documented examples—brewer Phil Markowski knows these beers inside and out, having written a popular book on the subject, while New Belgium features a Bière de Mars as part of its popular Lips of Faith series.

One of the post popular versions for sale today domestically is made by Jolly Pumpkin —they take the aging element seriously by putting it in oak barrels before its seasonal release. French examples include La Choulette Bière de Printemps , which was reintroduced in 2010; La Choulette has been making French farmhouse-style beers since 1895, so it is a fitting return to tradition.

March need not play host only to green lager and Guinness—a nice Bière de Mars is a welcome and timely alternative at this time of year.