

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Celis Beer: Born in Belgium, Brewed in Texas**

**Banas, J.**

**Charleston, SC: History Press**

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Intent on acquiring Celis Brewery in Texas, beer industry giant Miller Brewing dispatched Jake Leinenkugel to Texas in 1995 to convince Pierre Celis to sell at stake in the brewery that bore his name. Miller had purchased Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing, one of the oldest breweries in the United States, seven years before. Jake sat down with Celis to assure him that Miller had not imposed changes at Leinenkugel and that Celis could expect the same in Texas.

That did not prove to be true. The honeymoon was short, and the marriage did not last five years. Sales faltered. Miller made changes without consulting Pierre Celis and his daughter, Christine. In 2000, Miller bought the 15 percent of the company it did not already own. In 2001, it closed the brewery, selling off the equipment and the brand name.

Ron Acosta, a spokesman for Miller, told the Austin American-Statesman newspaper that the company had concluded Celis' beers were part of a fad or trend that was running its course.

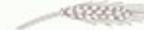
Obviously, Miller was wrong. American breweries such as Celis, broadly referred to as 'craft,' made nearly six times more beer in 2020 than in 2000. Blue Moon Belgian White, a beer much like Celis White and produced by MillerCoors after Miller merged with Coors Brewing, grew into a best-selling brand. And Celis beer is once again brewed in Austin, Texas.

That last bit of history gives Celis Beer: Born in Belgium, Brewed in Texas a satisfying ending, but Pierre Celis' historic influence was already firmly established before Miller came calling. This book makes that clear, mixing biography and history in a way that often reads like a memoir. Celis died in 2011, and in the acknowledgements author Jeremy Banas includes an extensive list of members of the family

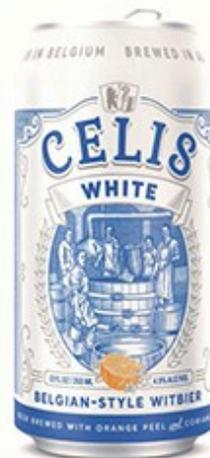
and associates he leaned on for those memories. He writes in a conversational manner, for instance referring to Celis as Pierre throughout. That he seldom cites sources and that the book lacks (foot)notes may frustrate those who want to make Celis Beer a jumping off point for further research.

Rather than weaving in a historical perspective of Belgian white beers, the history of brewing in Hoegaarden, or the emergence of craft breweries in Austin, Banas assigns each of those subjects its own appendix. The unorthodox approach allows him to focus his narrative on Pierre Celis and later Christine. (The first appendix – packed with information about the history of white beers and details about how they were made – was written by Yvan de Baets of

# CELIS BEER



**BORN IN *Belgium*, BREWED IN *Texas***



**JEREMY BANAS**

Forewords by Christine Celis  
and Chris Bauweraerts

Brasserie de la Senne in Brussels and is particularly authoritative.)

Celis was, first of all, the ‘Godfather of the Witbier’ although many witbiers came before. ‘We can’t point to somebody and saw they were the progenitor of the triple or even the IPA, or whatever else,’ Garrett Oliver of Brooklyn Brewery says in the introduction. ‘But in Pierre’s case, he may not have invented witbier, but he pretty much invented it for everybody who brews it now.’

He was 40 years old when he opened the Celis Brewery. He had been in teens when he learned to brew from a neighbor who operated the last witbier brewery in Hoegaarden. That closed in 1957, nine years before Celis began selling beer. Banas writes that the first batches at the new brewery did not turn out as Celis expected. There were no signs of fermentation a few days after he brewed. He finally went to a retired brewer for advice, and the brewer asked him if he remembered to add yeast. He had not, because he had never seen his mentor, Louis Tomsin, do the same.

The rest is, as they say, history, but reading Celis Beer is most enjoyable when Banas is passing along similar anecdotes.

For instance, Celis and his wife were visiting friends in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1986 when he received news of a catastrophic fire at his brewery. ‘Knowing the devastation that

had befallen the brewery, friends had an ambulance ready for Pierre, as they thought he would faint at the sight of what happened,’ Banas writes.

Ultimately, as a result of the fire, Celis lost control of the brewery, and in 1989 accepted a buyout from Interbrew, the conglomerate that would later merge with AmBev to form InBev. Celis was 64 years old, but already thinking about opening a brewery in America; another one that would achieve considerable fame but that he would end up selling to one of the world’s largest brewing companies.

The final chapter of the book, about the birth and near-death experiences of the brewery Christine Celis opened in 2017, will not be the final chapter in the Celis story. Christine has acquired much of her father’s original brewing equipment. She plans to put it on display in a living museum next to the brewery. ‘We would like to have brewing classes on the original equipment, to teach once again the techniques used in the nineteenth century up to my father’s time in the 1960s,’ she says.

The brewery itself preserves another important piece from the past. According to Banas, Miller changed the recipe for Celis White after taking control, and the new Celis Brewery has returned to the original. Of course, the beer menu also includes an East Coast IPA and a Lime Berliner Weisse.

STAN HIERONYMUS