

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Celtia: Histoire d'une bière de Tunisie ... De Luxembourg à Tunis**

**Nicolas, P.**

**Metz: SAS Indola**

**2021, Pp132, €20,00**

**ISBN: 978-2378590079**

Paul Nicolas, a French citizen, has travelled extensively in Tunisia and written numerous books concerning its culture and history. His latest book treats of the history of Celtia beer, introduced in 1951. La Société de Fabrication des Boissons de Tunisie (SFBT) owns the brewery, in Tunis.

SFBT is majority-owned by Castel, a major French producer and distributor of wine and other drinks. SFBT has long dominated the beer market in Tunisia, with Celtia and another brand, Stella, its flagships. As Nicolas makes clear, these beers are emblematic of Tunisia, to be sure the part which consumes alcohol (more on this below). In his introduction, and probably as he resides in Metz, the author gives a side trip to the notable brewing heritage of Lorraine.

The book then offers a short history of beer and brewing (in general), followed by the origins of SFBT. The firm was founded by French-trained Luxembourg engineer Joseph Baldauff and other investors in 1889, when Tunisia was a French protectorate. It started as a producer of ice and refrigerated storage facilities, e.g., to assist butchers in Tunis markets. Later it moved to larger premises, still in the refrigeration business, and in 1925 erected onsite a brewery and maltings (a common trajectory for many breweries worldwide).

Its first beer, Stella, was issued in 1927. The text benefits from excellent photo- and other illustrations, some of which suggest Stella was a dark beer originally, but today it is a golden lager, as Celtia always was. The original Stella was 3.5% alcohol and Celtia, 5%. The Stella line is now expanded, with "Black" and other versions but the original continues. The book describes well the current corporate structure of SFBT, its impressive growth over the years, and market position in the country.

The author then takes us on mostly a photo tour of the brewery, followed by a description of Celtia's origins. It was designed as a Pilsen-type, using until the mid-1980s Tunisian barley malted onsite. From that point the brewery commenced barley and malt imports from Germany and France. The Celtia name was suggested by the wife of Robert Palomba, then vice-president of SFBT.

The author then describes the visual and gustatory qualities of Celtia. Chapters succeed picturing art drawn for the brand by local artists, explaining newer brands introduced – there is now an I.P.A. with five hops, 'Legend by Celtia' - and describing the relationship of Tunisians to beer. Some 25% of the adult population consumes alcohol, but this can be



misleading (writes Nicolas), as a breakdown shows 35-40% of the male component imbibe, while only 5-10% of females do, the latter in chic, upmarket resorts. .

Nicolas explains that beer will not be sold to persons of apparent Muslim adherence unless they are tourists who can show a passport, but otherwise consumption can cross all creeds. Tunis and the major cities tend to be the main markets, but beer is sold in less populated areas, albeit more discreetly. Bars selling alcohol may be popular-type, restaurants with terraces busy at mid-day, and fashionable resorts frequented by a moneyed element or tourists.

After providing examples in each class, he concludes the part with an evocative statement on the popular bar (my translation):

[Such] establishments endure in everyday Tunis. Whether dating from the last century or more recent past, these restaurants, cheap cafes (*gargotes*) and other bars, simple and warm, hardly lack interest. What better diversion than to stroll (*flâner*), dawdle, and discover, here and there, occasionally mysterious sign-names: Au Temps mort, Bar'on, Bolero, Colibri, Source, Strasbourg, Taous, Tontonville, Univers... .

The chapters on food and gastronomy are of particular interest. Celtia and other beer often accompany *kemia*, the signature appetizer assortment in Tunisian dining. Beer also, today, can appear in or accompany a more modern cookery of diverse inspiration. The long-time C.E.O., Mohamed Bousbia, earns a chapter of his own, while a series of annexes limns the bios of notable past company executives. The book concludes with a segue-way into a company-owned winery, and useful brewing glossary.

The book is certainly a valuable addition to brewing studies and brewing history. Brewing since its industrial onset in the mid-1800s was always international but ever more so today, hence the interest of the book for a wider audience. The book too may interest some in expatriate Tunisian communities. If a further edition is issued, for our part, we would like to see 1940-1945 covered (omitted in the book), a clearer discussion of the origins of industrial bottom fermentation, and hopefully emergence of a Kindle edition. Many illustrations in the book are rather down-sized, as is the font (while certainly readable), no doubt due to the economics of modern book publishing. Kindle, or a similar format, could remedy that. In sum though, to M. Nicolas we offer *toutes nos félicitations*.

GARY GILLMAN

## Heritage Drinks of Myanmar

Corbin, L.J.

Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books

2022, Pp.85, £52

ISBN: 978-616-215-180-4

There are many dozens – probably hundreds – of brewing traditions around the world, from the *umqombothi* of South Africa to the *tiswin* of the Apache, the *kveik* beers of Western Norway to the chicha of Latin America. Most are pretty much unknown to the barley beer drinkers of the Western European tradition. Few are more obscure than the beers of South East Asia. Did you even know that there is a long tradition of local beers made with local ingredients among the many peoples of South East Asia? Now a bright light has been shone on one country, Myanmar, with a book that celebrates a host of different local beers, wines and spirits lovingly and carefully made from rice, from sorghum and from millet using traditional ingredients, flavourings, techniques and knowledge handed down from mother to daughter (mostly), in villages across the country and consumed for the sake of pleasure, of custom and of conviviality by family, friends and neighbours.

The author of *Heritage Drinks of Myanmar*, Luke James Corbin, could not come from a better background, having studied anthropology at the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific in Canberra and then worked for Burbrit Brewery, a



craft brewer in Yangon, Myanmar. Backed by dozens of excellent, evocative photographs from Shwe Paw Mya Tin, Corbin dives into descriptions of how each drink is made, with a brewer's eye on the techniques and technology, and an anthropologist's take on the place of these drinks and their brewers and makers, within the societies that make them and drink them

It is important not to exoticize these drinks. OK, that woman drinking *chiya* sorghum beer through a straw from a warm clay pot may be wearing rings that, to your eyes, make her look as if she has a strangely stretched neck, and that *lout khu* rice spirit may be flavoured with caterpillar fungus or infused with bees. But to the people with the neck rings, or drinking alcohol with bees in it, this is everyday stuff. Don't judge others by your norms, Norm.

Corbin takes care to say that the drinks featured in the book, seven beers, five spirits and two wines, are not 'a selection of the most peculiar or most representative' drinks to be found in the Golden Land, but 'an attempt to balance breadth with depth'.

I could quote extensively from every single story, but let's just concentrate on two or three. *Hpwe ayeq* is a rice spirit infusion from Northern Kayah State. In the village of Moe Bye, home mostly to Kayah people, nearly every household makes rice beer, but only a few take this one step further to produce *te*, a clear spirit distilled from this rice beer. The spirit is made from local broken rice, boiled until completely cooked, spread on a wooden table and left to cool. Yeast cakes, made from soft grain rice inoculated with a family strain of yeast, are then pounded and sprinkled over the grains. The yeast and cooked rice are then placed in clay pots and left to ferment for several days. The resultant creamy white rice beer is then distilled in a double-pot still, by being gently heated in the first pot, with the alcohol vapours running down into the second pot, filled with water, where it condenses and drips from a spout into a bottle.

Some of this spirit is infused with local herbs and flavourings, and one version, *hpwe ayeq*, is made with the assistance of the *hpwe*, the local name for a type of mole that collects plants it then carries back to its underground den. Hunters track the *hpwe*'s molehills, dig down, and remove the herby contents in a sack, preferably after they have been underground for at least a month in a moist, warm environment that softens the plants and makes them particularly fragrant. The herbs gathered from the *hpwe*'s den are then infused in the *te* for several weeks, turning the spirit a rich amber-red. On ordinary occasions the regular *te* is drunk without any infusions, but when guests arrive, or on special occasions, the *hpwe ayeq* is brought out. The philosophy

behind the drink is that the *hpwe* is a healthy, thriving animal, and it naturally chooses the best herbs and plants to keep its den healthy.

*Tar san ron*, or red millet beer, is made by the Mwim, a group of Chin people in Mindat district, southern Chin State, in the north-west of Myanmar. In Chin State each village household is more likely to brew than not, and different households often maintain their own yeast strains. The Mwim use red millet to brew with because of its flavour and its ability to make a beer that stays fresh longer. The millet grains are harvested and dried, and then boiled slowly in a metal pot. The cooked millet is spread out on bamboo mats to cool. A yeast cake is then crushed and sprinkled over the grains. Each household, in the past, would prepare its own yeast, making a yeast cake from sticky rice into which part of an older yeast cake has been pounded, mixed with herbs and spices. The creamy brown mixture is formed into cakes, sprinkled with more old yeast and covered with banana leaves for two nights. The yeast cakes are then dried until they turn white. Today brewers will swap yeasts and sometimes use a mixture of different yeasts collected from neighbours. Men are not allowed to touch the yeast.

The yeast-and-millet mixture is transferred into a clay pot and covered with dry leaves – banana, mango or custard apple – and left for two weeks to a month. One ready for serving, the *tar san ron* is drunk from cups made from the horns of oxen, or from gourds, or from a communal pot through a filter straw. *Tar san ron* is both an everyday drink and a drink for festivities, funerals, weddings and housewarmings.

Many people in Myanmar make *chiya*, or sorghum beer, and it is a speciality of the Kayah, otherwise known the Red Karen, of south-west Kayah State. Sorghum beer is, of course, found widely across East and South Africa. As in East Africa, the Kayah sip their sorghum beer through a straw from clay pots that are swimming with grains. (Drinking beer through straws, or reeds, from a pot is a tradition that goes back to the Sumerians around 4,600 years ago.) Only women make *chiya*, and mothers pass their brewing techniques on to their daughters. Kayah brewers boil sorghum grains for at least an hour, until they become sticky. They are then spread on mats and cooled, after which a yeast cake is mixed in with the grains. The grain-and-yeast mix is then put into a fibre basket and left for two days. When ready – often after a white fungus has spread over the top of the grains – the mixture is placed into a clay put, which is sealed tight. The final fermentation takes five to seven days. *Chiya* is drunk daily, with food such as roast chicken or pork, mostly by men, but it is also consumed at celebrations, wedding and funerals, and given as a gift. *Chi-*

ya is economically important enough that whole villages grow sorghum just to supply the needs of brewers.

All these different ways of making intoxicating drink, in a country with a population about the same as that of England, reflecting traditions that go back certainly hundreds and probably thousands of years, suggest a multitude of fields of study. What light do the brewing and drink consumption traditions found in Myanmar throw on the likely brewing and drink consumption traditions found in Europe a thousand and more years ago? Even more interestingly, what organisms are found in those yeast cakes? Is it our old friend *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*? Surely ... but if it is, how does it relate to the yeast found in Europe? And how do the yeasts found in, say, Chin State relate to those found in, for example, Kayah State?

I cannot recommend this book highly enough for anyone interested in beer, or in alcohol, outside the comparatively narrow traditions of modern Europe and urbanised North America. Corbin and his colleagues must be congratulated for giving us an essential insight into a set of traditions and drinking cultures that, while alive and mostly well, are still under threat from Western wines, beers and spirits – and well done Pernod Ricard Asia for sponsoring the book, and acknowledging in a foreword the value of these traditional cultures, and the *convivialité* they encourage. The original

Myanmar government sponsors of the book are all now in jail, as a result of the coup of February 2021, which put the Myanmar military back in control of the country, and forced Luke to pull the book from its original publisher in Myanmar, find a new publisher in Thailand, and completely alter several sections.

Almost 80 years ago my father was in what was then still called Burma, aged 22 or so, with the Imperial Japanese Army lobbing mortar bombs at him and his fellow Chindits. Did he, while he was there, drink any of the beers in this book, or any like them? I would not be surprised. I would love to travel to the country, and try some myself, though with a military dictatorship currently in charge that is not going to happen soon.

It's not cheap – \$65/£52 a pop – but as well as being rammed with fascinating facts, the book has been produced to a very high standard: the production values are excellent. In the UK and EU the book can be ordered via the Combined Academic Publishers website, [www.combinedacademic.co.uk](http://www.combinedacademic.co.uk). For ordering in Asia, use the Silkworm Books website, [silkwormbooks.com](http://silkwormbooks.com), while in North America the book can be ordered through the University of Washington Press Spring 2022 catalogue at [uwapress.uw.edu](http://uwapress.uw.edu).

MARTYN CORNELL