

The Origins of Oktoberfest: It May not Be What You Think

The origins of Oktoberfest and Oktoberfest style beers share many myths including the timing of Oktoberfest and that Oktoberfest style beers started with this now world famous celebration. It is true that the original Oktoberfest was held in October. In 1810, before Germany was united under Bismark, German lands were a series of independent regions similar to the feudal states of medieval times. Alliances among the regions were often sought after to gain power and strength and marriages were often a common way to solidify ties. One of the most famous regions was Bavaria both for its size and its strategic location in Central Europe. Franconia, in the north of Bavaria also became famous for being one of the oldest regions in Germany to brew beer going back an estimated 2,800 years. In 1810, King Joseph Maximilian of Bavaria decided to celebrate his marriage with Princess Theresa of Saxonie in a large meadow called the "Theresienwiese (wiese = meadow). Originally meant to be a horse race event it quickly turned out to be a several week event filled with food and by that time widely accessible Bavarian beer. However, it was the Bavarian farmers and not the royalty that continued the tradition as a celebration of an important economic and community event: the fall harvest. It has continued ever since. In 1818, it began to look like the celebration of today with booths, rides and carnival games. Each year, millions visit the "Theresienwiese" with its huge tents and carnival atmosphere. Today, Oktoberfest is the world's largest annual fair but unknown to many people, it's a celebration that takes place throughout Germany and some of the more heritage based and obviously less crowded, "harvest-fests" take place in these regions. If you want a more traditional and localized celebration filled with local old world foods and German micro-beers, these other regions are worth visiting. Oktoberfest does not start in October but is now a 3 week event that starts in September.

Oktoberfest style beers also did not start with this celebration in 1810. The town of Kulmbach (now famous for its Kulmbacher pilsner) began brewing nearly 3000 years ago. The beer was very different then. It was traditionally made with similar ingredients to bread. Before refrigeration, almost all beers were ales that were brewed quickly and did not last long. They were "top-fermented" meaning the yeasts were allowed to rise to the top of the fermenting beer at high temperatures and were typically unfiltered and dark. As beer increased in popularity, distributed mainly by the monks of medieval times who used it for nourishment and medicinal purposes, beer became a popular drink (would you want to drink the water in those days?!). The production of beer from the farmers to the brewers to the distributors became an increasingly important part of the economy. Beer was often used as currency for trade. The Wittelsbachs, who ruled Bavaria from 1180 to 1918 and were brewers themselves, in 1516 created what is now the world's oldest existing food regulation: the Bavarian Purity Law. The Bavarian Purity Law states that only the natural ingredients of barley, hops and water (and later yeast) could be used to make beer. It was at the time an important measure to ensure the purity and safety of beer as well as an important means to protect the farmers.

At the time, due to the lack of refrigeration, it was also legislatively forbidden to brew in the summer so the practice was to brew in the March ("Marz" in German) for fall consumption. Hence, way before the first Oktoberfest, "Marzen" beers were established to ensure fall beer availability. With the advent of better refrigeration in the 19th C, lagering with bottom fermentation became the new style. Now beer

could be fermented at lower temperatures and fermented for many months. It also changed the style of beer to a lighter, crisp and now cold taste. Now several forces were coming together to widen the popularity of beer: a product that now had a wider appeal, an 19th C industrial revolution that allowed mass production and greater distribution and in the days of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the growing popularity of Oktoberfest. "Marzen" or "Fest (celebration) Marzen" eventually became "Oktoberfest" beers that were still brewed in March but now lagered for months to be ready for fall consumption. Oktoberfest beers thus became seasonal beers and it was in Austria, not Germany, which began to use the lagering technique to make this lighter, specialty beer. Also known as Vienna style, this specialty beer is typically amber to red lager with a very malty and smooth character. Not to be outdone, Bavarian brewers injected their famous Bavarian malt and as a result Bavarian Oktoberfest beers generally tend to be richer with a distinct malt sweetness and aroma. There are now many adaptations to Vienna style lagers or Oktoberfest beers and many that you may find in the U.S. are not bound by this tradition and therefore can be very different in taste.

Typically, the Munich Oktoberfest concentrates on these lighter beers from brewing giants like Spaten and Beck's. But the revival of specialty and micro-beers, in large part triggered by the U.S., has sparked a renewed interest in many of the original ales and dark beers. Germany has more than 1,300 breweries (and about half of them in Bavaria!) that brew at least 20 different styles and about 7,000 different brands and Oktoberfest celebrations are beginning to show-case these styles.

So brewing in March for fall consumption did not start with the Oktoberfest in 1810 and in fact had been going on for centuries before in Germany. It was the Austrians that created the Vienna style lager that became Oktoberfest beers and oh yes, Oktoberfest starts in September!

With the large influx of Europeans into America over the last several hundred years, Oktoberfest has become a widely held event in almost every state. With the renewed interest in local foods and local beer, Oktoberfest seems to be going back to its roots as a celebration of the harvest and local products. I believe this to be a good occurrence as it allows local communities to give their twist to an important event: the harvesting of our local crops that is once again playing a key role in our economy and in the health of our children.

Questions or comments? E-mail me @ AdkAlps@Yahoo.com

Ernest Hohmeyer is the co-owner of the Adirondack Resort & Retreat @ Hohmeyer's Lake Clear Lodge. His parents were Europeans and the Hohmeyer's specializes in the 100 mile Adirondack diet with old world flair and houses the Adirondacks only hand-crafted Wine & Beer Keller with over 200 Old World beers.

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