

# Taking Pride in Unser Bier

**LOCALISM AND BEER** | Developing a beer culture is a slog. It takes decades rather than years. Switzerland is no exception here. On turning twenty, Basle's microbrewery Unser Bier shows that a new beer culture can take hold, that it is made up mostly of people creating beers they earnestly care about, and consumers who may find the idea of craftsmanship important, but for whom flavour rules supreme.

**STEREOTYPICALLY, THE SWISS** are perceived as being rather slow, both physically and mentally. A joke goes: Two Swiss are walking in the woods. Suddenly one turns around and squishes a snail. "It was irritating me! It has been following us for half an hour."

I was reminded of this – and numerous other jokes to this effect – when reading that after two decades, the Basle brewery Unser Bier ("Our Beer") still only sells 6000 hl beer per year. Unser Bier celebrated its 20th anniversary in September 2018 and over 5000 people attended the party.

Compared with craft breweries elsewhere on the continent, selling 6000 hl beer annually in a city of 200 000 inhabitants would be considered modest. But Unser Bier's co-founder Istvan Akos contends (see interview at the end of this article) that this

is a major achievement, given that Switzerland, a country of 8.4 million people, did not have a beer culture before Unser Bier – and a host of others – came along.

Mr Akos' claim may seem contentions. After all, in the 19th century Basle alone had nearly two dozen breweries. And did not Switzerland decide to protect its breweries with the help of an official beer cartel (1935 - 1991), which did everything trust-busters will abhor? Under the guardianship of the brewers' association it set prices, determined how far breweries could distribute their beers, which beer styles they could brew and how. Not enough, it even banned individual brand advertising for generic beer ads. The cartel was meant to protect its members by stifling competition, not least from imported beers, yet failed grandiosely: while ringfencing the breweries, their num-

ber halved to 32 between 1935 and 1990.

Contrary to Mr Akos, it could be argued that Switzerland did have a beer culture. Albeit, it was of the variety that Americans call the "BMC culture", an acronym for Bud-Miller-Coors. As brewers flogged technically perfect yet inoffensive tasting beers to consumers with the help of TV advertising, brand promotions, and big profile sports sponsorships, they managed to establish an "unconscious groupthink" (my preferred definition of "culture"). Shared by beer drinkers across the country, they would see beer as a social lubricant, but did not discuss it, care how it was made, or make it the centre of any social situations. It was a culture alright, even though today many in the US and elsewhere look back on it and think: "Phew, what a relief it's gone!"

Switzerland's beer cartel eventually came down. However, its sad legacy lingered on. Unconscious groupthink deemed domestic beer a uniform product, undifferentiated by styles and therefore boring. It was not something they hankered after, unlike imported beers, which immediately took off: from over 600 000 hl in 1991 to 1.2 million hl in 2014, the year they peaked. Over the same period, Swiss brewers combined lost 700 000 hl beer in output. In 2017, they produced about 3.4 million hl beer, down from 4.1 million hl in 1991.



When in 2015, for the first time in its history, Unser Bier managed to turn a profit, its board members wore t-shirts saying CHF 14551 (the profit) on the front and “Danke” (“thank you”) on the back. Istvan Akos is second on the left.

Currently, imports represent 30 percent of beer consumption. This is shockingly high and a prime indicator that most Swiss do not hold domestic beers in high esteem.

It is not as if the Swiss shun alcohol. According to the World Health Organisation, inhabitants aged 15+ consumed 11.4 litres of alcohol each in 2016, which is as much as the Brits drank (11.5 litres) but more than the Americans (9.8 litres). It is just that the Swiss are fairly liberal when it comes to booze. Remember that the national dish Fondue (that is melted cheese eaten with bread) requires a generous splash of Kirsch to turn oozy ... and more Kirsch afterwards to set the stomach right.

### Easy Does It

For most part, Switzerland is a wine country, which should not come as a surprise as it borders with France in the west and Italy in the south. Historically, the bulk of Switzerland sat within Europe’s southern wine belt, only its north-eastern part belonged to Europe’s beer belt. Of course, traditions, like culture, are not chiselled in stone. They can change. And they do. But slowly, if the unconscious groupthink about beer proves to be so deeply entrenched.

When Unser Bier was set up to brew “better beers”, to use an American term once again, the founders not only had to face up to cultural issues – the country’s preference for wine and its homegrown BMC mindset –, they also had to tackle a serious handicap: geography.

The city of Basle sits on the border with Germany. For years, locals have crossed the border to do their grocery shopping there, as the difference in prices is huge. Beer prices are a case in point. In Basle you will pay approximately CHF 10 (USD 10) for a litre of Unser Bier’s Wheat, compared with EUR 1.80 (USD 2) for a litre of Erdinger wheat

beer on the other side. Naturally, Swiss authorities have put a limit on alcohol that can be taken back customs-free. But two people in a car can still legally bring home with them one crate of beer (10 litres). If you don’t mind being caught smuggling, your car’s boot is the only limit.

Supporting a local brewery and its slightly madcap brewer, who thinks the world of his beers, has become such a powerful moral imperative in recent years that it is easily forgotten that two decades ago only the Slow Food movement touted localism as a brilliant way to foster community, help food producers make ends meet, and bring about world peace. Localism had not yet become the rallying cry against globalisation. In the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, globalisation was hailed as a liberation. Little did consumers know that the free flow of capital and cross-border acquisitions in Europe’s brewing industry came at a cost – plant closures and large-scale redundancies – and would bring with them more samey sameness than real product diversity.

Initially, Unser Bier’s emphasis on being a local brewery for local consumers was a direct consequence of their business plan. Founded by a group of beer aficionados, whose first homebrew was made in a spaghetti pot, they wanted to make sure that locals actually bought their beers. Being Swiss, they did not trust lofty promises of customer loyalty one bit. They realised that thriftiness could go a long way in turning local citizens into ardent customers and volunteer promoters. A novelty at the time, Unser Bier was funded with locals’ money. It was an early type of crowdfunding and roped in enough shareholders – 120 – to secure a bank loan and meet the initial capital requirements of CHF 1.5 million (then USD 1 million).

As happens to many brewery start-ups, its chosen inner-city site soon proved too tight and Unser Bier was forced to build a larger brewery in a disused industrial plant on the outskirts of Basle, which again cost money (CHF 5 million) and required additional crowdfunding. In 2018, Unser Bier proudly boasts over 9000 shareholders, whose annual dividend consists of free beer and nosh at the brewer’s Annual General Meeting. Usually, over 2000 shareholders turn up because the liquid dividend is huge. Here are the figures: a share in Unser Bier costs CHF 325 whereas some beers and pizza can easily set you back by CHF 50. That means the dividend is ... well, it is mind-blowing.

Knowing that eradicating the old beer culture will need caution and time, Unser Bier initially focused on easy-drinking beer styles like Amber, Blond, Wheat and Black. Later they added seasonals, an AYPPIAY (Swiss for IPA), limited-edition beers and barrel-aged beers. Unser Bier’s portfolio also holds whiskies, a beer spirit and a beer vinegar. To this day, all their beers are made with certified organic ingredients, some of which are sourced locally, such as certain hops. Although emphasising the “naturalness” of its beers, Unser Bier is not an advocate of the German Reinheitsgebot.

However, producing excellent beers is just a first step in building a beer culture. You need to toot your own horn and tell your story, too. That is why Unser Beer has always seen itself as a brewery and an education centre for beer. Its various seminars are very popular and have attracted thousands of people over the years.

For all their efforts, Unser Bier could have ended up selling small amounts of better beers to people who see it as a sort of lifestyle choice, like being vegan for example, had Switzerland not witnessed a large-scale sell-

out of breweries to international players. In short course, Carlsberg and Heineken mopped up breweries, with the largest one, Feldschlösschen from nearby Rheinfelden, going to Carlsberg in 2000. As the Big Brewers carved up the Swiss beer market between them and closed down breweries, Unser Bier's turned from a slightly romantic project – “our beer” – into a political one. Buying a local beer suddenly became an act of defying the forces of globalisation.

### ■ Beat Them with Wit and Ingenuity

To their credit, Unser Bier did not build their reputation by agitating tirelessly against the Big Brewers. Only when Carlsberg and UEEA sought to monopolise beer sales in Basle during the 2008 European Football Championship, did Unser Bier strike a PR coup. In true guerrilla fashion they brandished their witty moniker “Basle: more than just Calrsbreg®” (the typo was intentional) across town. The council's extortion attempt notwithstanding, shareholders readily coughed up CHF 18 000 (then USD 16 000) in fees so that Unser Bier could rent air-space in the city centre for a giant poster, which said “Beer from here rather than beer from there”.

Unser Bier did not just poke fun of the Big Brewers. They also gave right-leaning Swiss politicians a send-up, when they set up a political party, the PUB (“Partei Unser Bier”), which ran in Switzerland's general election of 2011, albeit unsuccessfully, with the slogan “Vote for our bottles instead” (“bottle” can mean “idiot” too).

Most recently, in 2016, they rubbed local dignitaries the wrong way by founding a Basle brewers' guild, which is open to everyone (women, men, and people from outside Basle) interested in promoting beer culture. It has over 130 members already. The move was timely as Basle has long had two wine guilds but no brewers' guild. As soon as the brewers' guild had been established, one of the wine guilds complained that the brewers had called theirs “E.E.” too, meaning “Eine Ehrenwerte” (“an honourable”), although E.E. was reserved for institutions and personalities in recognition of their outstanding contribution to Basle. Generously, the brewers' guild voted to drop the two letters at its following AGM.

Today, Unser Bier is one of 17 breweries in Basle. Financially, it is doing fine. In 2017 it had a turnover of CHF 2.7 million (USD 2.7 million) and a profit after tax of CHF 165 000. It employs six to seven people full-time.

If asked for the reasons of their success, Unser Bier's founders and management will say that it rests on their being a local brewery that brews and sells high-quality beers in Basle. It also helped that they insisted on their beers being made with certified organic ingredients, and that they refrained from brewing non-alcoholic beers, although they like to experiment with new recipes. Equally important was that they priced their beers as super-premium products because they believe that their beers are worth their price. Ultimately, it was their taproom and their run-

ning of events that have allowed consumers to establish a bond with the brand and promote it.

Unser Bier can revel in having helped trigger the boom in Swiss microbreweries. In 1998, there were only 68 breweries, two decades on there are over 1000. But the micros' share of domestic beer production is minimal: only an estimated 3 percent combined. Who said that changing the unconscious groupthink on beer will be easy? At least, thanks to Unser Bier and others, Swiss consumers have started to discuss beer; they care about how it was produced, and



**That is localism: “Beer from here rather than beer from there.”**

*All photos: Unser Bier*

make it the centre of social situations. That is a major achievement.

Despite the many challenges, Unser Bier believes that others can and should follow their example by adopting their guiding principles: “If you can drink it, you can brew it” and “If you can dream it, you can do it”.

In the following interview with BRAUWELT International, Istvan Akos, one of the founders of Unser Bier, talks about localism, turning shareholders into consumers and the many challenges facing Swiss microbreweries.

**Average beer consumption in Switzerland has dropped to 54 litres from 58 litres over the past two decades. It seems that not even the boom in microbreweries could reverse this trend.**

**Istvan Akos:** No, we have had no impact on beer volumes. But we have improved beer quality. And we are proud of having promoted beer culture. But while the Big Brewers continue to offer mostly bog-standard beers, the many micro- and nanobreweries here focus on the diversity of beer instead.

**The decline in consumption – is it to do with the Big Brewers dominating the market?**

**Akos:** Fat chance. The truth is that Switzerland is not a beer drinking nation ... well, at least not yet. Nevertheless, the Big Brewers have had to relinquish market shares to their more creative and innovative competitors.

**Again, the decline in consumption – is it because an antiquated beer culture only knows of big brands and imported beers?**

**Akos:** Who knows? Perhaps. The border separating Europe’s beer and wine belts runs diagonally across Switzerland – from the southwest to the northeast. Most likely we will need to do a lot more of persuading before we can boast of a fully-fledged beer culture.

**Twenty years on, Unser Bier’s output is still only 6000 hl per year. That’s not a lot. How do you explain this?**

**Akos:** When we set up Unser Bier it was our goal to locally produce beers with certified organic ingredients for local consumption. One of our early monikers was: “Rather small and beautiful than big and bigger” – or something to this effect. Besides, we wanted to become financially sustainable first. A sound base seemed to us a necessary foundation for scrutinising our next steps towards growth.

**You are located in Basle right on the border to Germany, which is well-known for its cheap beers. Did this have an influence on your growth?**

**Akos:** Probably, yes. If we had set up shop in Zurich, our core market would have easily been two or three times as large.

**The boom in microbreweries really only took off a decade ago. Since 2007 the number of microbreweries has grown fivefold to roughly 1000. What factors, do you think, have led to this rise in numbers?**

**Akos:** Well, most likely we have also done our bit. Over the past 20 years, we have taught over 12 000 people, who took part

in our beer experience seminars, that brewing beer is no rocket science. Also, there are now plenty of suppliers that offer brewing equipment in all sizes and prices, including kits coming out of China.

**In the US, the trend towards “localism” has boosted the number of brewery start-ups. Unser Bier equally signals a strong local bond between brewery, beer and consumer. What do people in Switzerland make of localism?**

**Akos:** The term is new to me. What has held true for us since time immemorial is this: beer needs a home, while at the same time beer can also be a home. That’s what we are offering. This is what we mean by local production. Don’t forget, our nearly 10 000 shareholders are both producers and consumers of their own beer. Right from the start we had this closed loop in mind.

**You seem to avoid using the English term “craft” in your marketing and publicity. Why?**

**Akos:** Really? This has not occurred to me. However, what we call “handwerklich” – craft or artisanal in English – is central to what we do. Our 125 litre brewhouse was chosen so that our brewers can experiment freely.

**What do you think: can Swiss microbreweries sustain their rapid growth?**

**Akos:** Most likely we will grow beyond that magical number of 1000 excisable breweries. But I am sure that there will be a shake-out. Some will go bankrupt. Others will be fed up with self-exploitation and will gradually cease to brew.

**If you were to gaze into your crystal ball – what does the future hold for the Swiss beer market?**

**Akos:** The number of breweries will decline as the Big Brewers will launch beers, which hitherto have been brewed by the smaller guys, and will badger them with the sheer weight of their market power. The breweries, that will survive, are those which are innovative and make the best the use of the quality of their beers and marketing, to achieve a high degree of customer loyalty.

**Mr Akos, many thanks for talking to us.**

*Ina Verstl*