

Was trinken die Deutschen? das Bier, die Biere

type of beer: die Bierart, die Bierarten
 bock beer: das Bockbier, die Bockbierarten

the quality of the beer in Bavaria. So enamored were the Münchener, that they hired a bräumeister from Einbeck (one Elias Pichler) to teach them how to craft the wondrous beer of the north. Munich was on its way to brewing fame.

To this point, Einbecker beers were not known as bock, but the name was given to their ilk by the Bavarians, probably as a corruption of the name “Einbeck.” Munich had achieved some brewing prowess during the 17th and 18th centuries. Its beers were darker than those of Einbeck, and the stronger versions of those were now called bock. Doppelbock was invented in Munich by St. Francis of Paula monks as a sustaining, fasting beverage and it emerged as a hefty, separate style. The Paula monks introduced their Doppelbock to the public in 1780, and today’s incarnation is known as Paulaner Salvator.

Where does this leave Maibock/Helles bock as a style? It’s safe to assume that all bocks 200 years ago—Einbecker or Münchener—were fairly dark, with the former being a bit lighter. But they were not nearly as pale as today. In fact, no beers were really pale in Continental Europe until the first part of the 19th century. At that time, pale malt was developed, and lighter lager styles of today (pilsner, Munich helles, Vienna lager and Märzen) came from this revolution.

Bock beers, collectively, are perhaps more associated with seasonal beer than any other family of beers. Traditional bocks were brewed to be consumed in the winter, while the stronger doppelbock was made for the early spring/Lenten period. Missing, however, was a similar beer, suitable for the late spring and summer, leading into autumn...the domain of festbiers. While it’s tough to pinpoint the exact origin of maibock, it is generally accepted that the paling of bock coincided with the general trend of chic pale lager production in the mid- to late-19th century.

The vacuum was filled by the Hofbräuhaus of Munich, which produced the first Maibock for annual May Day celebrations. The brewery deftly took advantage of the public’s infatuation with pale beers by making a strong lager with the maltiness

that Munich was famous for. The urtyp (original version) was born, and soon many German breweries latched onto the beer and the appeal of the seasonal release.

MAIBOCK BREWING

Brewing Maibock or helles bock requires some skill. To adhere to convention, a bock must have an original gravity of at least 1.064. It must also possess some muscle, body and maltiness, while retaining a degree of finesse. The toasty malt character must be achieved without the use of the darker Munich-style malts that comprise dunkels and other bocks. Finally, it has to be somewhat refreshing. A fine line to straddle, indeed.

German lager base malts add lots of character without overwhelming the wort. Pilsner malt produces golden wort, Vienna malt a light amber wort and Munich malt full amber wort. As this is roughly the color range of a finished helles bock (golden) or Maibock (light to medium amber), these malts are perfectly suited. They are used either alone or in various combinations. Vienna and Munich malts are lightly kilned for the rich, breadly, toasted melanoidin aromas associated with darker German brews. In Maibock, these aromas aren’t covered by the use of caramel or roasted malt. German breweries might employ a decoction mash—a time-honored technique of boiling a portion of the mash—to further enrich the malty components. A helles bock, on the other hand, might simply use pilsner malt as its grist, a decoction mash and a lengthy boil to concentrate the soft malt character. With a minimum original gravity of 1.064, the finished beer ranges from 6 to 7.5% ABV.

Helles bocks have a noticeable hop character, unlike dark traditional and doppelbock, and are often thought of as a strong Munich Helles lager, with the accent on malt. A Maibock is often hopped a little more liberally, a perfect complement to the lightly toasted malt, as both the hops and malt are inherently spicy. A Maibock can be thought of as a fortified Vienna lager. Hops would obviously include German nobles, such as Tettnang, Hallertau and Hersbrucker.

These pale bocks are quite common in Bavaria, and are usually seasonal. They are not terribly common in North America, but are becoming more so as breweries grow more adept at brewing lagers. The best bet to find them would be in areas known for their microbrewed lagers, (e.g., Pennsylvania and Wisconsin), but this author has enjoyed outstanding versions from all about the country. Three of the best are Spring Bock from the Carolina Brewing Company (in Holly Springs, NC), St. Boisterous from the Victory Brewing Company (Downingtown, PA) and Fighting Finches Maibock from Tyranaena Brewing (Lake Mills, WI).

As winter gives way to spring and summer, beer preferences change as much for the weather as for the new seasonal offerings. Some brews bridge the seasons adroitly. Maibock and helles bock embody the middle ground of brewing, just as late spring and early summer bestride the compressive summer weather—mellow and satisfying enough to soothe the heat, but comforting enough for the cool nights. They might be the perfect year-round beer. Though more refined than their Einbecker ancestors, they are still considered by many to be the most flawless brews, much as they were regarded several hundred years ago.

Spaten Bock

Spaten may be more famous for its Optimator doppelbock, but its helles bock is no less stellar. Surprisingly pale in the glass, it has a long-lasting crown. The aroma is full and malty, with a fresh but soft hop aroma. The palate is full but somewhat crisp, and rich with pale malt character. The hops serve only to hold up the malt. With 600 years of brewing behind it, Spaten never seems to disappoint. This is a classic German blond bock, suitable for any time of the year. (6.5% ABV)



Mahr’s Bock

From Bamberg in Upper Bavaria, Mahr’s is small and family owned, and does things just a little differently than its counterparts. Their bock is minimally filtered and unpasteurized. Very light orange in color with a slight haze, it is frothy and leaves fine lace. A flowery hop aroma graces a soft malty, breadly nose. Quite flavorful and more complex than many other pale bocks, with a quenching bitterness and appetizing finish. This beer might be considered unrefined by some—but is pure heaven to others. (6.5% ABV)

