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# **BELGIAN BLOND ALE**



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BY GORDON STRONG

# BELGIAN BLOND ALE

Belgian blond ale (BJCP Style 25A) is a name given to a range of beers by the BJCP to describe the Abbey-type beers produced in Belgium, and most commonly associated with Leffe Blond.

## BELGIAN BLOND BY THE NUMBERS

OG: .....	1.062–1.075
FG: .....	1.008–1.018
SRM: .....	4–7
IBU: .....	15–30
ABV: .....	6.0–7.5%



Photo by Charles A. Parker/Images Plus

Some people have asked me how I choose the styles to write about in this column. At the start, it was easy – I just started writing about new styles in the 2015 BJCP Style Guidelines. But after I wrote about all of those, I now have a free hand to pick a style. Sometimes I have encountered a new style and want to describe it, sometimes I have read about a historical style and want to explore it, and other times I have enjoyed a good commercial example that inspired me. This time, I decided to let chance play a role. I said I’d write about whatever style won the next competition I judged. In Paraguay at the time, a wonderful Belgian blond won Best-of-Show, so that’s what we get.

It comes at a good time since I was doing some research on Belgian beer styles and the use of designations such as Trappist, Abbey, and the like, and how they relate to styles. In 1999, the Union of Belgian Brewers created a “Certified Belgian Abbey Beer” logo for breweries that were licensed to use the name of a current or former Abbey. This followed the 1997 introduction of the “Authentic Trappist Product” logo by the International Trappist Association. However, these logos are appellations that indicate the origin and authenticity of a product, and really have nothing to do with the actual beer styles.

While the BJCP has used these terms to describe styles, they can be somewhat confusing in the marketplace. It’s not that confusing for homebrewers, but the BJCP guidelines are often used for purposes other than their original intent. The Trappists are actually concerned that people will brew beers commercially and call them Trappist because it’s the name of the style. Far fetched? I don’t know, but

why pick a fight with monks? I don’t really want a quarterstaff upside the head.

I know, Belgian blond is an Abbey style, not a Trappist style, but looking at the names of all the styles needs to be done at the same time so they don’t conflict. This means that it’s likely that the BJCP will make some naming changes in the future to try to clarify this usage. In the meantime, remember that Abbey and Trappist are controlled names implying origin. Blond is a color, and is used in Belgium to describe many different beers (amber and brown are the other common color names there). Belgian blond ale (BJCP Style 25A) is a name given to a range of beers by the BJCP to describe the Abbey-type beers produced in Belgium, and most commonly associated with Leffe Blond.

## HISTORY

Belgium has a monastic brewing history going back hundreds of years, at least to 1200; however, this legacy is not continuous. Napoleon Bonaparte forcibly secularized France (and its conquered territories) during his reign as a way of weakening the influence of the Catholic Church. In Belgium, this meant Abbeys were abolished and the brewing equipment removed. In the 20th century, two world wars also impacted breweries as invading armies often seized equipment. So much of Belgium brewing is defined by the post-WWII era.

Much like the United States lost most of its continuous heritage due to Prohibition, Belgium had phases of brewing and rediscovery, changes to market demands, and financial influences. It makes for a nice story to have a belief in beer styles going unchanged for hundreds of years, but that really isn’t true.

## BELGIAN BLOND

(5 gallons/19 L, all-grain)  
OG = 1.063 FG = 1.013  
IBU = 25 SRM = 7  
ABV = 6.6%

### INGREDIENTS

10.5 lbs. (4.8 kg) Belgian Pilsner malt  
12 oz. (340 g) aromatic malt  
1 lb. (454 g) flaked maize  
12 oz. (340 g) Caravienne or caramel malt (20 °L)  
5 AAU Saaz hops (60 min.)  
(1 oz./28 g at 5% alpha acids)  
3.3 AAU Hallertauer hops (10 min.)  
(1 oz./28 g at 3.3% alpha acids)  
4.9 AAU Styrian Goldings hops  
(5 min.) (1 oz./28 g at 4.9% alpha acids)  
Wyeast 3787 (Trappist High Gravity) or White Labs WLP530 (Abbey Ale) or Safbrew BE-256 yeast  
¾ cup corn sugar (if priming)

### STEP BY STEP

This recipe uses reverse osmosis (RO) water. Adjust all brewing water to a pH of 5.5 using phosphoric acid. Add 1 tsp. of calcium chloride to the mash.

Step mash: Mash in base malts (Pilsner and aromatic) and maize at 131 °F (55 °C) and rest for 15 minutes. Increase to 146 °F (63 °C) using direct heat or infusion and hold for 40 minutes. Increase to 158 °F (70 °C) using direct heat or infusion and hold for 15 minutes. Add crystal malt and raise to 168 °F (76 °C) for 15 minutes, recirculating the wort. Fly sparge with 170 °F (77 °C) water, collecting 6.5 gallons (25 L) of wort.

Boil the wort for 90 minutes, adding hops at the times indicated in the recipe. At the end of the boil, chill the wort to 67 °F (19 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete. Rack the beer. Rack and package the beer, or rack and clarify

the beer if desired with finings before packaging (prime with corn sugar and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate).

## BELGIAN BLOND

(5 gallons/19 L, extract with grains)  
OG = 1.063 FG = 1.013  
IBU = 25 SRM = 7  
ABV = 6.6%

### INGREDIENTS

7.8 lbs. (3.5 kg) pale liquid malt extract  
1 lb. (454 g) Caravienne or caramel malt (20 °L)  
5 AAU Saaz hops (60 min.)  
(1 oz./28 g at 5% alpha acids)  
3.3 AAU Hallertauer hops  
(10 min.) (1 oz./28 g at 3.3% alpha acids)  
4.9 AAU Styrian Goldings hops  
(5 min.) (1 oz./28 g at 4.9% alpha acids)  
Wyeast 3787 (Trappist High Gravity) or White Labs WLP530 (Abbey Ale) or Safbrew BE-256 yeast  
¾ cup corn sugar (if priming)

### STEP BY STEP

Use 6 gallons (23 L) of water in the brew kettle; heat to 158 °F (70 °C). Steep the crystal malt for 30 minutes, then remove, allowing the bag to drip into the kettle.

Turn off the heat. Add the malt extract and stir thoroughly to dissolve completely. You do not want to feel liquid extract at the bottom of the kettle when stirring with your spoon. Turn the heat back on, add the first hop addition, and bring to a boil.

Boil the wort for 60 minutes, adding remaining hops at the times indicated. At the end of the boil, chill the wort to 67 °F (19 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete. Rack the beer. Rack and package the beer, or rack and clarify the beer if desired with finings before

packaging (prime with corn sugar and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate).

Since much of this style is based on what Leffe has done, let's look at their history with this beer. The Abbey Notre-Dame de Leffe was believed to have a brewery from the 1200s until the Napoleonic era, according to Michael Jackson. However, there was no record of a brewery in the early 20th century. But the monastery is believed to be the first to enter into a formal licensing agreement with a commercial brewery in 1952. Through several acquisitions, the brand became owned by InBev, and heavily marketed worldwide. You can't take two steps in Belgium without seeing the Leffe stained glass logo hanging outside a bar.

The association with a current or former Abbey is what defines Abbey beer today; at one time, it was any beer with a vaguely religious reference. While many Abbey beers are derivative of the type of beers that Trappist brewers make (dubbel, tripel, and the like), a beer like Leffe Blond is not. It was developed after Leffe Brune (Brown) was revived in the 1950s, and is basically a pale version of a dubbel. It should not be confused with the pale, hoppy, bitter, lower-strength beer brewed by several of the Trappist breweries in Belgium, nor should it be confused with the generic Belgian beer menu term that simply identifies the color.

While Leffe is the most popular example of this style (with the marketing muscle of InBev assisting, no doubt), the style is made by several other Abbey breweries such as Affligem, Grimbergen, and Val-Dieu. But these beers are in the style of Leffe, and also designed to appeal to Pils drinkers looking for something more substantial, but without the higher strength of a tripel.

While there is nothing about Abbey and Trappist designations to denote beer styles as we know them, there are some generic observations that can be made (Michael Jackson has also made these distinctions, so I don't think I'm going too far out on a limb). Trappist-made beers tend to have more character than equivalent Abbey versions, and are often more aggressive (drier, hoppier, maltier, etc.) while

Abbey beers are often a bit sweeter or more appealing to a broader audience. Again, don't look for this in any definition, but it is a common observation.

One final footnote about the spelling of the name. "Blond" is correct in Flemish, and "Blonde" is correct in French; Belgium uses both languages, so either spelling is technically correct. Most Belgians have no problem switching between Flemish and French (and often English as well), so this really isn't a point to argue about.

## SENSORY PROFILE

A Belgian blond ale is, well, blond in color – generally golden. The beer is clear with a characteristically dense and creamy white head that laces well. Leffe is described as having kind of glowing, sunshine-like color. So something in the gold range would be fine.

The aroma is malty, with Pilsner-type aromatics but with a slightly sweeter or honey-like character. Fruity esters and spicy phenols blend in, but the esters tend to be a little more prominent. I often find orange and lemon citrus notes. The phenols are more peppery than clove-like, and are a background note. A light floral or spicy hop note can be present, if it complements the other aspects. As a moderately-strong beer, a little perfumy alcohol might be noted as well.

The flavor has similar components as the aroma, with the malty flavor coming on first but with the beer finishing dry, smooth, and soft. The bitterness is moderate and balanced, but with the malt flavor winning out ever so slightly. The beer shouldn't be sharp or crisp, and the hop character should be restrained. The yeast profile is similar to the aroma, with fruity esters similar to citrus (orange, lemon) and a slight spicy peppery-phenol character. The malt can have a slight honey or faint caramelized sugar flavor, but no flavors associated with darker malts. Any hops noted should complement the yeast character, not overshadow it.

The beer is typically in the 6.5–7.0% alcohol range, so some alcohol can be noted and a light warmth. It should never burn or have a hot impression. The beer should have a

moderate body but with a higher carbonation that helps liven up the beer and help the head stand. The overall character should be smooth and possibly a touch creamy, but not in a heavy way. Remember, this should be a generally dry beer.

Taken as a whole, the beer is a smooth, approachable Belgian ale with a gold color, moderately-strong alcohol, and a subtle fruity-spicy Belgian yeast character. The beer should be dry, well-carbonated, and smooth, but not crisp and biting. The balance is very slightly towards the malt, but hop bitterness is present to avoid an overly sweet impression in the finish. The malt can have a slightly sweet impression on the palate, however.

The beer might have characteristics similar to a Belgian strong golden ale or Belgian tripel, but not as intense. A Belgian blond will be a touch sweeter and not as bitter in the balance as either of those styles. It has a strength and balance similar to a Belgian dubbel, but without the darker flavors associated with the deeper color. The beer can have a certain subtlety to it, while still showing the complexity associated with Belgian beers. So don't expect a high intensity of aromas or flavors, but it should still register as Belgian on your senses.

## BREWING INGREDIENTS AND METHODS

Stan Hieronymus' classic *Brew Like a Monk* book offers a solid insight into Belgian brewing practices. His observations match my observations through several visits to Belgium. I encourage anyone interested in these types of beers to purchase this book and read it carefully.

Most Belgian beers have a base of Pilsner malt, even the dark ones. Dingemans is the most common maltster seen in Belgian breweries, although there are other Belgian and French maltsters that make fine products (Castle and MFB, for instance). If these products are not available, try German malts (such as from Weyermann) but the German malts tend to be a little cleaner. I find a subtle fruitiness in Belgian Pilsner malts that enhances their beers, so that is my first choice here.

Belgian beers traditionally get color from candi sugar syrups, not sugar rocks. In the 1990s, these syrups weren't available so many homebrewers would use a variety of specialty malts to get color and flavor. Today there are several brands of syrup available, and those are best used for Belgian beers. However, since a Belgian blond is pale, no dark syrups are needed. Pale syrup could be used, but it's basically the equivalent of using sugar. Belgians make sugar from sugar beets, so I often seek white beet sugar for this use. It's common in my area, but white cane sugar is fine too.

Looking at the range of products in a Dingemans catalog can give insight into what Belgian brewers have most available to them. When looking for additional character in a Belgian blond, the extra maltiness of Munich or aromatic malt is desirable in a light amount, as can be lower-color crystal-type malts. Since Belgian beers typically are dry, a restrained use of any crystal malts should be employed.

Hieronymus has some recipe information (but not an actual recipe) for Leffe Blond in his book. One key point that I noted is that the recipe uses flaked maize instead of sugar. I have brewed the recipe with both, and I agree that corn gives a more accurate character for a Leffe-inspired beer.

He also mentions that most Belgian Trappist and Abbey brewers use a step mash in order to get a properly attenuated beer that still has body. Similar to modern German brewing practices, I think this method helps deliver the malty but dry experience without a heavy mouthfeel. Conversion temperatures vary, but it's common to have a rest in the mid-140s °F (62-64 °C) where the bulk of the conversion takes place.

Malty Belgian beers are more common than hoppy ones (at least until recent years, with few exceptions), so hops don't have a huge emphasis. Noble-type European varieties (Saaz, Hallertauer) are common, as are Styrian Goldings and sometimes English hops such as Goldings. Bittering, flavor, and aroma additions are common, but dry hopping is not. In general, hops shouldn't interfere with the yeast char-

acter in most Belgian styles.

Yeast drive much of Belgian brewing, and Belgian blond is no exception. While the yeast character in this style is not as aggressive as in tripels, saisons, and other similar styles, it does provide the estery and spicy notes that are commonly found in commercial examples. Hieronymus identifies Leffe as using a "house strain" but Jackson says they are using yeast from Vieux Temps. I think there are several Belgian yeast strains that would work in this style, provided the overall intensity of the yeast profile is moderate.

### HOME BREW EXAMPLE

I've played around with this recipe several times, and like the balance it has now but I always have ideas of things I'd like to try. It's a fairly simple grain bill, and I like to use Belgian malts (Dingemans, specifically) for the grains.

Pilsner malt is the base, with at least 80% of the grist. I bump up the maltiness and sweetness with a combination of aromatic malt (for maltiness) and Cara 20 (for a light sweetness). Flaked maize rounds out the grain bill, and also rounds out the flavor. I have tried this recipe with corn sugar instead of maize, and I prefer the flavor and mouthfeel of the maize.

I step mash this beer so that it doesn't wind up too full in body or sweet. If you can't step mash, try a single infusion at about 147 °F (64 °C). Belgian beers are typically well-attenuated, so don't mash too high. The beer has a soft finish, so use calcium chloride as your calcium source and steer clear of the sharper calcium sulfate salt.

Hops are European, with a mix of Saaz, Hallertauer, and Styrian Goldings. These choices were based on the *Brew Like a Monk* book. If fresh US substitutions are available (Sterling for Saaz, Vanguard or Liberty for Hallertauer), feel free to use them. I haven't really tasted anything that substitutes well for Styrians, so try to find those.

I've made this with Westmalle yeast (Wyeast 3787, White Labs WLP530) since it is a favorite of mine, but it's not likely to be the Leffe strain. Michael

Jackson's *Great Beers of Belgium* book says Leffe uses the Vieux Temps strain, but I don't know that it is commercially available. Since Vieux Temps is a Belgian pale ale, I think it might be interesting to try the White Labs WLP515 (Antwerp Ale) strain (used in De Koninck, the most classic Belgian pale ale). That yeast will be a little more neutral in character, which may be better in this case.

If you do use the Wyeast 3787 yeast like I did, I have some tips for you. Don't start this too warm; it creates some strong over-ripe banana flavors when you do. Also, don't try to restrain the temperature – this yeast hates to be cooled down; it will just floc out if you do. I like to pitch around 66-67 °F (19 °C) and let it rise. It might need rousing towards the end to fully attenuate. It will produce a very high and sticky kräusen. I think beers made with this yeast need some warm conditioning time to mature. My tasting notes say the beer peaks at about three or four months. It can be a little rough, with some tart apple notes if too young. So maybe trying that Antwerp Ale yeast would be better if you need it sooner.

Another yeast that might be worth trying in this style is the White Labs WLP570 or Wyeast 1388 strains (Duvel yeast). It will be a little more estery but less phenolic than the 3787/WLP530 yeast. I haven't used it in this style, but it would be my next choice.

Remember that this beer shouldn't be as aggressively "Belgian" as some other well-known styles (tripel or saison, for instance). You're looking for a well-balanced and drinkable beer with above-average strength, and showing a mix of Pils malt flavor, balanced bitterness, light hops, with an estery character and light spice. The finish should be soft and clean, with more of the impression of malty and corny sweetness than sugary sweetness. 