

Brew the best of
YOUR OWN®

BELGIAN GRISSETTE



Please note all file contents are Copyright © 2020 Battenkill Communications, Inc. All Rights Reserved. This file is for the buyer's personal use only. It's unlawful to share or distribute this file to others in any way including e-mailing it, posting it online, or sharing printed copies with others.

BY GORDON STRONG

BELGIAN GRISETTE

... made for coal workers in the Hainaut province of Belgium along the French border, similar to the saison made for farm workers.

BELGIAN GRISETTE BY THE NUMBERS

OG: 1.028–1.032
FG: 1.002–1.004
SRM: 3–10
IBU: 20–30
ABV: 3.1–3.9%



Photo by Charles A. Parker/Images Plus

I hadn't intended to write about this style now, but it's come up as a question several times over the last month so I thought it must be topical. Usually the question is, "Under what category do I enter a grisette in a Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) competition?" While it likely could be entered in several places (depending on the actual recipe), I think the best answer is actually, 25B Saison, while specifying table (session) strength, and that wheat is the character grain. Personally, I would use the comment or description field on an entry form to say something like, "Grisette: A session-strength (3.5% ABV) wheat saison."

OK, I gave you the answer up front, but I know that I have a lot more explaining to do. Like, what's a grisette? Why is it popular now? Why isn't it a historical style? What if I add other ingredients to it? Why isn't this in the BJCP Style Guidelines? I've gotten those questions as well, and I'll be happy to explore them in this article.

It seems to be a popular trend among craft brewers today to explore historical styles, including updating and re-interpreting them. Perhaps there is no better example than Gose, a once-dead German style that has found new life as a craft style. Maybe not so much as the original beer, but as the base for a whole range of products with added ingredients (fruits, spices, etc.) – so much so that the Great American Beer Festival added a category solely for Gose with added ingredients. It's ironic to me that as more people discover Gose, the less brewers seem to want to make that actual beer; I think it's because it sounds more interesting than "wheat beer" as the base style.

I see a similar movement now with grisette. Craft brewers are starting to make another refreshing, sessionable wheat-based drink, this time one with bitterness and significant yeast

character rather than a sour and salty beer. It also should appeal to session IPA drinkers looking for another hop-forward beer without being so IPA-like. It seems to me that there is a similar need to understand the style before it gets lost under all the inevitable specialty ingredients that brewers will add.

Another reason this beer comes up is that it won Best-of-Show at the 2017 National Homebrew Competition. However, the beer that won wasn't a straight grisette; the winning beer was a grisette fermented with *Brettanomyces*. That beer was entered (correctly) as a BJCP Category 28A Brett Beer with grisette as the base style. This is a great example of the use of a base style not explicitly listed in the BJCP Style Guidelines as the base for a specialty-type beer. That example could be extended for fruit-based beer (passionfruit grisette, for example) or other specialty beers. The beer would not go into the experimental beer category just because the style isn't named in the guidelines.

Some people have argued that grisette should be a BJCP Category 27 Historical Beer. I see the merit of this argument, and judges shouldn't penalize an entrant for entering a beer here, but I think Saison is the right place, and we'll examine why when we finally talk about the history and characteristics of the style. But the basic argument is that we shouldn't create a new style definition when an existing style definition already completely addresses the style.

HISTORY

There isn't much written about grisette as a style aside from a brief mention in Phil Markowski's *Farmhouse Ales* book (pp. 131-133, 183). He describes it as a minor form of farmhouse ale ("of no great distinction") made for coal workers in the Hainaut province of Belgium along the French border, similar

GRISETTE

(5 gallons/19 L, all-grain)

OG = 1.031 FG = 1.003

IBU = 29 SRM = 4 ABV = 3.7%

For people who have complained about my complicated recipes, this is about as easy as it gets. Two malts, two hops, single step mash, dried yeast, no temperature control. No excuses not to brew this.

INGREDIENTS

- 5 lbs. 8 oz. (2.5 kg) Belgian or French pale ale malt
- 1 lb. (0.45 kg) Belgian wheat malt
- 6 AAU Saaz hops (60 min.)
(2 oz./57 g at 3% alpha acids)
- 3 AAU Saaz hops (5 min.)
(1 oz./28 g at 3% alpha acids)
- 1 oz. (28 g) Styrian Goldings hops (0 min.)
- Lallemand Belle Saison or Wyeast 3711 (French Saison) or White Labs WLP590 (French Saison Ale) yeast
- 1 cup corn sugar (if priming)

STEP BY STEP

On brew day, prepare your ingredients; mill the grains, measure your hops, and prepare your water. This recipe uses reverse osmosis (RO) water. Add ¼ tsp 10% phosphoric acid per 5 gallons (19 L) of brewing water, or until water measures pH 5.5 at room temperature. Add 1 tsp. calcium chloride (CaCl₂) to the mash.

On brew day, mash in the malts at 149 °F (65 °C) in 10 qts. (9.5 L) of water, and hold this temperature for 60 minutes. Raise the temperature by infusion or direct heating to 168 °F (76 °C) to mashout. Recirculate for 15 minutes. Fly sparge with 168 °F (76 °C) water until 6.5 gallons (24.5 L) of wort is collected.

Bring the wort to a boil and boil for 75 minutes, adding the first hop addition 15 minutes after the start of the boil. The second hop addition is added with 5 minutes left in the

boil. The 0-minute hops get added after the heat is turned off. Give the wort a stir to create a whirlpool, then let settle for a few minutes. Chill to 70 °F (21 °C) and rack to the fermenter.

Oxygenate, then pitch the yeast. Ferment at 72 °F (22 °C) until signs of fermentation are complete, about 7 to 10 days. Rack the beer, prime, and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate.

GRISETTE

(5 gallons/19 L, extract only)

OG = 1.031 FG = 1.003

IBU = 29 SRM = 4 ABV = 3.7%

INGREDIENTS

- 3.5 lbs. (1.6 kg) pale liquid malt extract
- 10.5 oz. (300 g) wheat liquid malt extract
- 6 AAU Saaz hops (60 min.)
(2 oz./57 g at 3% alpha acids)
- 3 AAU Saaz hops (5 min.)
(1 oz./28 g at 3% alpha acids)
- 1 oz. (28 g) Styrian Goldings hops (0 min.)
- Lallemand Belle Saison or Wyeast 3711 (French Saison) or White Labs WLP590 (French Saison Ale) yeast
- 1 cup corn sugar (if priming)

STEP BY STEP

Start with 6 gallons (23 L) of water in the brew kettle and heat up to 158 °F (70 °C).

Remove the water from heat and add the malt extract. Stir thoroughly to dissolve the extract 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 and bring the wort to a boil.

Total boil time is 60 minutes, adding the first hop addition at the start of the boil. The second hop addition is added with 5 minutes left in the boil. The 0-minute hops

get added after the heat is turned off. Give the wort a stir to create a whirlpool, then let settle for a few minutes. Chill to 70 °F (21 °C) and rack to the fermenter.

Oxygenate, then pitch the yeast. Ferment at 72 °F (22 °C) until complete, about 7 to 10 days. Rack the beer, prime, and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate.

to the saison made for farm workers. Grisette literally means “little gray” in French, but is said to refer to the frocks worn by female factory workers holding trays of ale for workers exiting the mines. That sounds kind of sketchy to me, but really isn’t any more obscure than trying to pin down the origin of the name porter as applied to beer.

Markowski describes the beer as being popular in the late 1800s with at least 30 brands in existence at the height of the Belgian mining industry. Oral history said it was a low alcohol, light-bodied saison-like golden ale that was dry and refreshing. Probably around 3 to 3.5% alcohol, hoppy, and not sour (it was a present-use beer made and served quickly, so it wouldn’t have had time to sour).

Stan Hieronymus has a very brief mention in *Brewing with Wheat*, not of the style but of a reference from 1874 (N. Pelset, *Traité théorique et pratique de la fabrication de la Grisette et des bières pâles*). It describes a range of multiple strengths, similar to saison. The beer uses malted wheat, is dry hopped, and has a hoppy balance (hops used more for bitterness than flavor).

There is more research by David Janssen online in his blog, www.horscategoriebrewing.com. He gave a good presentation on this topic at the 2016 HomebrewCon in Baltimore, Maryland, but anyone can read his essays on his blog. I highly recommend it for additional background and discussion.

So to me it seems like grisette is contemporaneous with saison and differs mostly in that it always uses wheat and that it was originally made for miners rather than farm workers. However, if these beers are described as brewed for laborers, you can easily see how they are similar. Given that grisette can have a range, it fits with the current definition of saison; however, as the lower gravity versions were most popular, I think it reasonable to limit the default definition to that session-strength class.

SENSORY PROFILE

I think it would be helpful to reference the BJCP Style Guidelines for

saison; the definition for grisette will be a more strictly-defined subset of this style. A grisette is a pale beer, so a color that is yellow to golden is appropriate, but it could go up to a golden-orange color (light gold is most typical). The head should be white and long-lasting (it has wheat in it, after all). Clarity can vary from clear to hazy, although I personally think clear saisons look better (call me a heretic, but I also think clear IPAs look better).

The aroma will be dominated by hops and yeast. The malt contribution will be much lower, and typically have a grainy or lightly bready aspect. Hops can be fairly forward, particularly if the beer is dry-hopped. The hops should be fresh and show typical qualities of European hops, including floral, spicy, or earthy notes. The freshness can come across as a slight grassiness, but this shouldn’t be strong. The yeast character is typically spicy and fruity, often with black pepper and citrus (lemon, grapefruit, orange) as part of the mix. The hops and yeast should complement each other without clashing aspects, and can be moderately low to moderately high in intensity.

The flavor will have similar characteristics as the aroma with the hops, yeast, and grain being noticeable. The malt provides a grainy background that lets the yeast flavors come through. Hops can be lower in the flavor (low to moderate), but the bitterness should be moderate to high. The finish should be very dry, which can accentuate the hop bitterness and make it seem like it has more IBUs than it does.

The beer is low-gravity so alcohol should not be detectable. The body is relatively light but shouldn’t be excessively thin. The carbonation is normally high to very high, which can give a sensation of body to the beer. The overall impression is dry, refreshing, and bitter.

BREWING INGREDIENTS AND METHODS

The grist can be fairly simple, with the bulk of the grain bill being base malts with between 10 and 25% wheat (mostly malted, but some flaked wheat can be used if more body is desired). Pilsner malt can be used as the base,

as can pale ale malts. I will often use a blend of base malts to give extra character. I think a grainy edge is nice, so I probably wouldn’t use all German pilsner malt. Pale ale malt would work well, but I wouldn’t use highly biscuity British malts. Some people like to add character malts, such as Vienna, for some additional maltiness or interest. That’s fine too; as I said, I like blends of base malts to create some malty depth. Even 6-row malt can give a grainy note to the beer and would have a place in this style, although it probably wouldn’t be traditional for the region where this style originated. For saisons, I often use a “clean out the closet” approach and use odds and ends of bags of malt I have open. Purists might shudder at this approach, but some of the best saisons I’ve made have featured combinations of leftover malts I was using up.

The beer should finish very dry, so any mash program should be geared towards attenuation. Step mashes are a traditional solution for attenuation (I often use 131 °F/35 °C, 143 °F/62 °C, 158 °F/70 °C), but those using single-step mashes should choose conversion at the lower end of the range (e.g., 149 °F/65 °C). I have had success with my “round trip” mash program, starting in the mid-to-upper 150s °F (upper 60s °C), recirculating as it cools to 140 °F/60 °C, then raising it through recirculation heating until it hits 158 °F/70 °C).

When creating the recipe, keep in mind that the beer will finish with a very low gravity (maybe 1.002). Since you want a lower ABV (around 3.5%), do the math to see where you need to start. It will be quite low, probably near 1.030 or so. So the grist may seem very small when compared against your typical batches that have both a higher ABV and a higher final gravity (FG). It’s OK to go a little higher in ABV, but I would try to keep it at no more than 4%.

Hop bitterness is an important part of the style, but the IBUs don’t need to be huge. I would think that around 30 IBUs is probably the upper limit if the beer is kept to around 3.5% ABV and that the final gravity is low. For formulating recipes, keeping the IBUs in the

20s would be fine.

Dry hopping was mentioned as being used; I think whirlpool or post-boil steeping hops would also work well for adding a fresh hoppy aroma. Selecting hop varieties that play well with saison-type yeasts is an important consideration. Noble-type hops with a spicy-floral character (Saaz, Tettnanger, Hallertauer) would be good, as would popular hops with Belgian beers such as Styrian Goldings (a personal favorite of mine, especially as a late addition).

As a kind of saison, I think any saison yeast would fit the bill. I prefer the spicy ones that are highly attenuative, such as Wyeast 3711 (French Saison) or Wyeast 3726 (Farmhouse Ale). For those that use dry yeasts, the Danstar Belle Saison yeast is a great choice. I haven't tried the new Fermentis SafAle BE-134 yeast, but it looks like it has the same characteristics and is worth considering.

I tend to avoid the Dupont-type yeasts that are finicky and have high fermentation temperature requirements. The yeast I'm recommending should work at normal fermentation temperatures, or perhaps a bit warm (72 °F/22 °C) so they are also suitable to warm-weather brewing.

Keeping the water profile relatively neutral will let the yeast and hop character shine through. I would avoid adding calcium sulfate (gypsum) since that can clash with noble hops, and may lead to an excessively dry finish.

HOMEBREW EXAMPLE

I'm hard-pressed to not just say, "take your favorite saison recipe, make sure you are using wheat malt instead of any other cereal grain, and adjust it to about 3.5% ABV." You really wouldn't be wrong.

However, I took a slightly different approach here and went relatively simple (for a change). I picked a pale ale malt as a base (I'd suggest one from Malteries Franco-Belges, Castle, or Dingemans) with about 15% wheat malt (also Belgian/French) and targeted an original gravity (OG) of 1.031 to get about a 3.7% ABV beer with an FG of 1.003. Mashing at 149 °F (65 °C) as a single infusion will produce a drier finish.

For hops, Saaz is my bittering and aroma hop choice with Styrian Goldings as my final aroma addition after the boil. This combination has been successful in many of my Belgian recipes, and I know they will work well together. For bitterness, my recipe targets 29 IBUs since I like my hoppy beers on the bitter side. I chose a dried yeast, Danstar Belle Saison, for its spicy profile and high attenuation. As a summer beer, I fermented it at room temperature in an air-conditioned house (around 72 °F/22 °C).

You can try to make this as an extract beer, but I worry about being able to hit the low final gravity target. You never know the mash program used to create the extract, so you may wind up with a much higher FG. It won't really taste like a saison from a mouthfeel perspective, but it still should drink well. In a pinch, you could probably use a weizen-type malt extract but the percentage of wheat will be higher.

For people who have complained about my complicated recipes, this is about as easy as it gets. Two malts, two hops, single step mash, dried yeast, and no temperature control. No excuses not to brew this. Since it doesn't take a large quantity of ingredients, it's easy enough to make a double batch for this beer if you have the room in your kettle.

If you enter this in a competition, be sure to provide a little bit of an explanation to the judges since not everyone will know this style (even if they recognize the name). Some people like to call the table or session strength versions a petite saison. But I think explaining it as a grisette and then reminding judges that it is a session-strength wheat saison is the easiest description to understand. 