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KELLERBIER



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KELLERBIER

Some will say it's more of a process than a style, but I would go a step further — it's more of a lifestyle.

KELLERBIER BY THE NUMBERS

OG:	1.045–1.051
FG:	1.008–1.012
SRM:	3–7
IBU:	20–35
ABV:	4.7–5.4%



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Real Lager? What am I talking about? Is this some Reinheitsgebot joke? No, I'm just trying to point out that kellerbier is in Germany what Real Ale (cask ale) is in the UK. They have no common origin or linkage, other than they are natural, gentle handling of young beer. In the beer gardens of southern Germany, this is a very popular summer style.

Kellerbier (literally, “cellar beer”) is not well understood in the United States and elsewhere, yet its popularity seems to be growing. Some will say it's more of a process than a style, but I would go a step further — it's more of a lifestyle. While it is proper to think of it as a process applied to existing styles, the resulting beers are different enough that they can be thought of as unique styles in their own right. From a sensory perspective, there is certainly a difference between a kellerbier and a German helles.

To be honest, I never really thought too much of this style. I had tried some commercial examples, and they seemed to be an excuse to rush out lagers too quickly, or a way to slap a style label on a faulted beer. I remember one that caused me to exclaim, “That tastes like my lagers before they are ready.” Kind of like the old joke, “If it's infected, just call it Belgian.” I wasn't ready to accept yet another faulty beer as a legit excuse for a style.

However, I was wrong. I had just tried poor examples. Recently, I had several beers that were very nice, and helped me understand how to differentiate a kellerbier from related styles. While it is correct to say that a pale kellerbier is an unfiltered, cask-conditioned helles, that really doesn't do the style justice. The style actually has a somewhat broader range, too.

I tried a kellerbier from Port City Brewing Co. in Alexandria, Virginia that was quite bitter at 35 IBUs but still well balanced since the malt and yeast character were higher than in a helles

(the Spalt hops were nice, too). While in Quito, Ecuador for the Copa Mitad del Mundo competition, I loved the Mut Lager from Cervecería Mut, a gold-medal winner in that competition. Brewer Dora Durán was kind enough to share her recipe with me, which I've scaled to homebrew systems (see page 27).

The Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) categorizes kellerbier as Style 7C in the Amber Bitter European Lager category, and calls out two variations: The pale kellerbier and the amber kellerbier. The pale is based on helles and the amber is based on Märzen; this article will primarily discuss the pale version.

HISTORY

Kellerbier is popular in Franconia, a region of Germany in the north part of Bavaria. But that is just the administrative region of Franconia; there is a broader region where the Franconian people live that touches upon several bordering German states. The Franks were a Germanic tribe that settled around the Main River in the German Central Uplands, and who still maintain their cultural identity and dialect.

Franconia also happens to be one of the most densely populated brewing regions of the world. Some of the larger cities in the region are Nuremberg, Bamberg, and Würzburg. Several traditional styles are made in the region, including the well-known rauchbier of Bamberg (see “Style Profile” in the September 2019 issue on rauchbier).

Kellerbier is best thought of as a home and artisanal craft beer that represents the traditional way of brewing in the area. The standard pale lager of the area (helles) is brewed normally but then conditioned in casks for service. Served unfiltered and naturally carbonated, the beer is best enjoyed fresh and young. The natural carbonation is often in an unbunged cask, so the carbonation level is gentler (yet isn't still, since the carbonation isn't driven off).

KELLERBIER

(5 gallons/19 L, all-grain)
OG = 1.051 FG = 1.013
IBU = 18 SRM = 5 ABV = 5%

This recipe is based on the gold-medal winner kellerbier Mut Lager from Cervecería Mut out of Quito, Ecuador. Special thanks to the Brewer Dora Durán for her help pulling this recipe together for the homebrew scale.

INGREDIENTS

7.75 lbs. (3.5 kg) German Pilsner malt
1.2 lbs. (544 g) German Vienna malt
1.2 lbs. (544 g) Bestmalz caramel Pils malt (2 °L)
7 oz. (198 g) biscuit malt
1.6 AAU Perle hops (first wort hop) (0.2 oz./6 g at 8% alpha acids)
3.2 AAU Perle hops (80 min.) (0.4 oz./11 g at 8% alpha acids)
0.4 oz. (11 g) Saaz hops (0 min.)
SafLager W34/70, Wyeast 2124 (Bohemian Lager), or White Labs WLP830 (German Lager) 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. calcium chloride to the mash.

Mash the malts at 126 °F (52 °C) for 10 minutes. Raise the temperature to 145 °F (63 °C) and mash for 40 minutes. Raise the temperature to 162 °F (72 °C) and mash for 20 minutes. Start recirculating wort. Raise the temperature to 172 °F (78 °C) for 10 minutes to mash out.

Add the first wort hops to the kettle. Sparge slowly and collect 6.5 gallons (24.5 L) of wort. Boil the wort for 90 minutes, adding hops at the times indicated in the recipe.

Chill the wort to 48 °F (9 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete (typically, two weeks). Cool to 36 °F (2 °C) and lager for five weeks at this temperature.

Rack the beer, prime and bottle

condition, or keg and force carbonate. If traditional cask-conditioning, don't prime the beer. Leave it "open" (in the fermenter), then bung it "closed" just prior to service.

KELLERBIER

(5 gallons/19 L, extract with grains)
OG = 1.051 FG = 1.013
IBU = 18 SRM = 5 ABV = 5%

INGREDIENTS

4.5 lbs. (2 kg) Pilsen dried malt extract
0.5 lb. (0.23 kg) Goldpils® Vienna dried malt extract
1.2 lbs. (544 g) Bestmalz caramel Pils malt (2 °L)
7 oz. (198 g) biscuit malt
1.6 AAU Perle hops (first wort hop) (0.2 oz./6 g at 8% alpha acids)
3.2 AAU Perle hops (80 min.) (0.4 oz./11 g at 8% alpha acids)
0.4 oz. (11 g) Saaz hops (0 min.)
SafLager W34/70, Wyeast 2124 (Bohemian Lager), or White Labs WLP830 (German Lager) yeast
¾ cup corn sugar (if priming)

STEP BY STEP

Use 6.5 gallons (24.5 L) of water in the brew kettle; heat to 158 °F (70 °C). Steep the crushed malts in a mesh bag for 30 minutes, then remove, allowing to drip back into the kettle.

Turn off the heat. Add the malt extracts and stir thoroughly to dissolve completely. Turn the heat back on and bring to a boil. Add the first wort hops while raising to a boil.

Boil the wort for 90 minutes, adding hops at the times indicated.

Chill the wort to 48 °F (9 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete (typically, two weeks). Cool to 36 °F (2 °C) and lager for five weeks at this temperature.

Rack the beer, prime, and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate. If traditional cask-conditioning, don't

prime the beer. Leave it "open" (in the fermenter), then bung it "closed" just prior to service.

Locally, the beer is served from the cask in beer gardens. This isn't really unique to Franconia (or Bavaria, for that matter). Anyone who has gone to Düssel-dorf to sample altbier has seen beer served from casks. The Oktoberfest celebrations begin with the tapping of the first cask, and other festivals (like those that celebrate the spring with bockbier) follow the same tradition.

As the beer is young, unfiltered, and often lightly carbonated, sometimes the beer is served in stoneware mugs or steins, which was the traditional way of serving beer in Germany before glassware began to be used to display the new sparkling, bright, and clear lagers in the mid-1800s. So the kellerbier tradition draws upon an older tradition of beer, which has a nice feel in the hilly country land of Franconia.

When discussing kellerbier, several similar or related styles are often brought up – for instance, lagerbier, landbier, zwickelbier, and zoiglbier. Mostly these are synonymous but sometimes indicate more narrow or broad interpretations. Landbier is basically country-style beer (things that may have been called farmhouse in Belgium?), lagerbier is an outdated term for that new lager style back in the ale-only days. Zwickelbier and zoiglbier tend to be narrower, and can be applied to younger beer or beer that is allowed to naturally carbonate in a closed container.

SENSORY PROFILE

Remember that we're only talking about the pale kellerbier now, so don't expect richer malt flavors of the amber version. The pale version does have more character than a helles, and the malt often takes on a freshly-baked bread or crackery malt character. It doesn't have a raw doughy flavor, but does have clean, fresh flavors derived from proper German Pilsner malt.

The malt profile can have a little more character than a helles, in that the beer is typically served fresh and the malt hasn't had time to fade or oxidize. A bit more richness in malt character than a helles can be expected, so the intensity is a little higher. And because of this, the hop and yeast character also is stronger.

I find the balance of the pale

kellerbier to be nearing that of a Vienna lager, where the malt and bitterness intensity is nearly equal. It's OK for the kellerbier to retain some more of its helles lineage by being tilted slightly to the malt side, but the age of the beer should allow more of the hop character to come through.

The hop flavor and aroma can be higher in a kellerbier to better balance the fresh malt. It doesn't really approach the level of a Pilsner, but it is often higher than in a classic helles where the malt is king. The hops should be very fresh, and reflect the character of noble Saazer-type hops, which often have a floral, spicy, or herbal character.

The yeast character is where I want to spend the most time discussing the profile, as I think this is what tends to get misunderstood. Let me start by saying what the beer isn't. It shouldn't be an unlagered, yeasty mess – excessive sulfur, eggy flavors, diacetyl, and acet-aldehyde fermentation byproducts, and similar flaws should not be prominent. When a lot of yeast is present in the beer, the perceived bitterness can seem higher (this is known as “yeast bite”), and it can take on a nutty, bready flavor similar to a good Champagne. This character shouldn't be excessive, though; remember that brewing faults are still faults. They don't suddenly become acceptable in this style. It just doesn't need to be as squeaky-clean as a helles.

Kellerbier is a lager, and should be lagered. This process shouldn't be rushed, but doesn't have to completely reduce all fermentation byproducts. Cool fermentation for a proper bottom-fermented beer should not produce esters, so don't try to rush this with a warm fermentation. Lagering reduces sulfur compounds and other fermentation byproducts, so give the yeast some time to work. If you brew lagers, it shouldn't taste like one where lagering is only half done – you know what I mean if you taste your beers during the process. It still needs to have lager smoothness, but perhaps a touch more rustic.

So I've talked about what it isn't or what it shouldn't be, but do you understand what fermentation character it needs to have? A good lager should be clean and smooth, without fermentation byproducts, and be ready to drink.

A kellerbier is that as well, but might be just very fresh. All the flavors should “pop,” and the yeast might seem a little young. But it still should be clean, smooth, and highly drinkable.

Kellerbier is basically a fest-type beer, made for drinking in beer gardens. So it can be a bit stronger than an average lager. Typically, it is at least 5% ABV but could be stronger. However, I tend to like them at that level since they are more conducive to day drinking. It is a fully attenuated beer, so it shouldn't seem sweet (especially with the added bitterness and yeast character to balance). The body is typically moderate, and may seem a touch heavier than a helles, but it still should be quaffable one liter at a time.

As kellerbiers are described as unfiltered, this means they don't have to be crystal clear. That doesn't mean they should be murky, hazy messes that are confused with yeast pitches. Many lager yeasts are powdery so they tend not to naturally flocculate quickly. So like an unfiltered Kölsch, the beer can have a little shine to it. It's not necessarily desirable to seek a hazy beer, so don't do anything special to achieve it – it's just not a fault if present.

The pale color and reflectance from some suspended yeast can make the beer a touch darker than a helles. But it should still be in the gold range. Just think about the type of color that you can get from a gold beer with a bit of haze to it – that's about right for this style. Since the beer is traditionally naturally carbonated in open containers, the head can be low. However, when packaged, the head can seem normal – remember that like the UK cask ales, the bottled versions make some compromises. As a judge, be lenient with the appearance and especially the fresh beer characteristics when the beer is bottled.

Sometimes the style is based on a different style such as Pilsners, so the beer can have a slightly different balance. Those that are produced this way are often described as a keller Pils, and sometimes the keller word is used to describe the process. So again, don't be hyper-critical when it's clear the process-based technique is being applied to a different base style. Expect

a slightly richer, hoppier, fresher, and yeastier version of the base style.

One final note — some people see “cask-conditioned” and expect that to be the same as “barrel-aged.” That’s not correct; conditioning is just the maturation phase rather than explicit aging to develop additional character, including oak and/or barrel character. The casks used here are often wood, yes, but they are neutral in this usage. The final beer should not have a woody/oaky character.

BREWING INGREDIENTS AND METHODS

Brewing a kellerbier is pretty much like brewing a helles — normal German brewing ingredients, procedures, and techniques apply. German Pilsner malt should be the bulk of the grist, but this style could have a bit of character grain to boost the maltiness, breadiness, and richness. Using traditional German maltsters such as Weyermann, Bestmalz, Durst, and the like, should produce good results.

German brewers use step mashes in modern times, but traditionally could be using decoction mashes. In pale beer styles, decoction mashing could produce more color and flavor than desired. When decocting, brewers might want to avoid additional character malts as they are gaining additional flavors through the decoction process.

Step mashes help with attenuation and body (mouthfeel) development in German lagers, enabling them to have malty flavors without being sweet, and dryness and high drinkability without being watery and thin. If using a hybrid (single-step) infusion process, aim for converting on the low end of the range to promote attenuation.

German and Czech noble Saazer-type hops are typical in Bavarian lagers, so they are also good to use here. Hallertauer, Tettnanger, Spalt, and Saaz are good choices, or American equivalents. Freshness matters, so try to choose the freshest hops possible. Having some flavor and aroma hops noticeable is more traditional than in helles. The bitterness level can be higher than helles, typically in the 20-35 IBU range. That allows a wide range of interpretations for brewers.

German lager yeast is a must, and strains that don’t produce excessive sulfur are desirable since the beer will be served young and could have more yeast character. I like the Weihenstephan 34/70 strain, a true workhorse of German lagers, but others can also be used. Try to pick ones that favor maltiness, and ones that don’t throw much sulfur, diacetyl, or other fermentation byproducts.

Fermenting cool is traditional for German lager yeasts, so don’t try to rush this with warm fermentations that could produce esters. After fermentation, lagering near freezing temperatures is required to properly reduce fermentation byproducts and other green beer flavors.

HOMEBREW EXAMPLE

As I said, I’m indebted to Dora Durán of Ecuador for this recipe. I drank more of this beer in Quito than any other of the outstanding beers there.

Dora uses Bestmalz in her beers, so the ingredients reflect that choice. She brews on a 200-L (1.7-BBL) system, which is about 10 times the size of a typical homebrewer systems — fairly small by American craft beer standards but not unusual for craft brewers in South America. I’ve converted her recipe to fit *BYO* recipe standards.

She is using Pilsner malt for the bulk of the grist, and adding character through the addition of Vienna malt, caramel Pilsner (a honey-like flavor), and a touch of biscuit malt to increase the graininess. The beer is step-mashed to get attenuation and body.

German and Czech hops provide the traditional flavors, and as is typical for South America, she uses dry yeast. In my own trials, I’ve had outstanding results with the Saflager W34/70 dry yeast so I can endorse this product, but similar liquid strains could be substituted. She ferments cool and then lagers for five weeks (which is more similar to how I produce my Kölsch and altbier; I normally go eight weeks for my lagers).

I tried her beers bottled and on draft, both were outstanding. I think freshness matters, so try to drink them like hefeweizens — young and fresh. I think I’ll be adding this to my normal

summer rotation of beers. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. 