



The German Reinheitsgebot

A Myth of the 20th Century?

The German purity law of 1516 is, at least in its basics, known to most beer drinkers. It has been an issue for public discussions even before the European Union took action in skipping it. For some it is the oldest observed food law in the world, for others it is a fossil from the times of nationalistic protectionist-policy.

The European High Court dropped the Reinheitsgebot in 1987. However, the German brewers declared themselves still committed to it. Foreign beer declared accordingly can since then be sold in Germany, but the success is modest. To an extent as a *quid pro quo* the EU has recognized the Bavarian Reinheitsgebot as a registered quality label and the German beer as a protected traditional food. The importance of the Reinheitsgebot for the first-class quality of German beers and the reputation of German brewers throughout the world are undisputed. But the question is interesting: how far has the German brewery complied with these rules over the past 500 years?

What Does It Mean?

First one has to clarify what the Reinheitsgebot means. This is already the first dispute, especially if one compares the original text from 1516 with contemporary laws—for example the current beer

tax law. Yeast is of course not mentioned at all, because it was unknown as an ingredient until the invention of the microscope.

On the other hand the current laws mention other starch or sugar sources than barley malt: wheat malt, inverted sugar, sugar from starch and sugar-based colors. A clear line is drawn here between top- and bottom-fermented beers, though knowledge of this would have definitely overextended the dear old Bavarian duke Wilhelm IV. Likewise the grouping into several gravities: permitted and illegal. Use of hop extracts is permitted, but at least with the stipulation that the components are identical with the natural hops and may not be added later than wort boiling. Addition of water at fermentation stage is permitted exceptionally. Beer clarifiers are permitted, but have to be removed without any trace, as far as technically possible.

In total, the most recent Reinheitsgebot contains more paragraphs dealing with exceptions than with rules. And almost at the end, as a kind of a highlight, there is a beautiful sentence in context with mixing of different gravities: "The Minister of Finances may grant exceptions." This could go for the whole law, and there is no better way of showing the motivation behind the law. Why is the Minister of Finance in charge of the Reinheitsgebot and not the ministry for Agriculture or Public Health?

by **Guenfher Thoemmes**