

has learned that every source of barley sugar is precious. "trečiokas," or third-running brew, was a tradition born of necessity, a question of survival for times when provisions were scarce. Still, this table beer he brews by force of habit is as beautifully earthy and herbal as his regular-strength "alus."

When the Soviets were being shown out of Lithuania and private business prospects began thriving, no less than 400 breweries started up. But once regulations had been put in place by the new local authorities, close to 250 of those small breweries were forced to close, faced with the impossibility of answering to imposed sanitary standards. Today the number of breweries fluctuates between 50 and 70. And a lot of small countryside brewers are struggling to make ends meet, faced by ferocious competition from the influx of multinational breweries. But the ancient countryside brewing traditions of Lithuania are still alive and truly captivating.

In Vilnius, whose old town center is protected by the UNESCO World Heritage Foundation, a few bars have opened up in the last few years to showcase the brews of the countryside, giving a tasteful glimpse of what is going on a couple of hundred kilometers to the north in the hinterlands. Most Lithuanians don't even know there are dozens of rustic brewers in their own country, so bars like Alaus Namai, Šnekutis, Šnekutis Užupis and Šalčininkai are godsend. Visiting the hidden breweries in the countryside that supply them can prove to be quite a chore, even for locals. The level of organization needed for a stranger to see these breweries is considerably higher.

### A Rewarding, But Challenging Trek

Expensive gas prices (\$8 a gallon), infrequent public transport and low income mean few people in Lithuania travel far in their own country. Furthermore, a foreigner traveling the far reaches of Lithuania to discover the people who've preserved the brewing traditions to endure has to hire an interpreter. Otherwise, many obstacles appear from out of the blue. For one, a stark distrust of strangers, bred by the Soviet state mentality of old, can stop you in your tracks. Even with a pre-arranged appointment through a well-known figure in the



The wary Udriene is an exception to the rule of secrecy.

area, tiny Dvareliškiu Alus, a farmhouse brewery in a wooded area of Pasvalys, was far from welcoming. Upon arrival, we noticed a few one-liter plastic bottles of beer standing on the ground near a 10-foot wooden cross erected in the lawn. After a few minutes of waiting around, a burly man peered through a door on the second floor of the house. By visibly pointing at the bottles, he told us to take the bottles and... go elsewhere. Hospitality doesn't seem to be a trait all northeastern Lithuanians share.

Exhibit number two: upon arriving in Pakruojis, my Lithuanian translator Martynas, who is a passionate homebrewer, took it upon himself to visit a neighborhood bar where some countryside brews could be found. He found a house on which the usual

*"She doesn't boil at all,  
adding a hop tea in the mash  
and in the fermenter."*

"Pilstomas Alus" was written. "Draught Beer" could only mean quality beer in these parts. First off, the front door was locked. A decoy surely because he heard noise coming from the back of the house, so he walked around and indeed found a second door. His accent not being the same as the people from the brewing northeast, tension immediately rose in the room and he felt compelled to leave after seeing the waitress take her time to pour him a pint of the Joalda brew the men were drinking. Imagine if they'd heard him speak a different language altogether...

Moreover, most breweries in these parts are open only by appointment. Jovaru Alus, in the hamlet of Jovarai, used to have a roofed terrace open to the public and a three-table tasting room inside open every morning from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. But these days, Aldona Udriene, whom some call the queen of countryside brewers, opens only for people who give her advance notice. "It's safer this way," she says. Her house also has no sign whatsoever to advertise the fact that she has a brewery and is willing to accept guests. These beautiful signs are hidden inside. "People in the neighborhood would break them or take them down," she said worriedly.



The local alus can be a strange but mesmerizing brew.