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Trappist Beer Needs Trappist Monks to Brew It, but the Vocation Is Dwindling

Abbeys have fewer brothers these days, worrying those devoted to the high-end beers

By [James Marson](#)

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HAMONT-ACHEL, Belgium—Exclusive Trappist breweries are facing a supply problem: They're running out of monks.

Brothers at the picturesque abbeys are aging, and fewer men are taking vows these days. But in order to be labeled an “Authentic Trappist Product”—which commands a price premium as well as historical cachet—real monks need to be involved.



Brothers' brew

The situation got so bad at St. Benedict's Abbey in Hamont-Achel, Belgium, that in January it relinquished the Authentic label for its Achel beers, known for their malty and fruity taste, because no monks remained to supervise production.

Other monasteries are also running low on members of the cloistered Catholic order.

“Our father abbot jokes that we used to have 15, enough for a rugby team, but now we only have 12—a soccer team plus one reserve,” says Fabrice Bordon, brand ambassador for Chimay, the label for beers and cheese from Scourmont Abbey, in Chimay, Belgium. Chimay, like many of the Trappist breweries, has a staff of laypeople to operate much of the business, although the monks have the final say on big decisions.



St. Benedict's Abbey, top, in Hamont-Achel, Belgium, and its shop, above. The abbey brews Achel beer.

PHOTO: JAMES MARSON/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(2)

Monks hope to attract new brothers to fill gaps. Just two are sufficient to oversee brewing, although five or more is preferable to preserve the community, says Mr. Bordon.

It's a business conundrum that typical problem-solving strategies don't address.

The monks "believe in God and that He will solve this," says Manu Pauwels, marketing manager for the brewery at Westmalle Abbey, a relative giant with some 30 brothers in Westmalle, Belgium, a village near Antwerp.

Other modern business needs can be a challenge for the aging brothers. At St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Mass., the monks run sales and marketing for their Trappist beer,

including Instagram and Facebook accounts. “To be candid, the monastic lifestyle doesn’t attract a lot of people who are skilled at that,” says Father Isaac Keeley, the 70-year-old chief executive of the brewery.



Beer taps at the Spencer Brewery at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Mass. PHOTO: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS



Father Damian, former abbot at St. Joseph's, left, and Father Isaac, the brewery director, at the brewery in 2014. PHOTO: STEPHAN SAVOIA/ASSOCIATED PRESS



Brother Jonah Pociadlo cleaned kegs for the Trappist ale at the Spencer brewery. PHOTO: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

The challenge facing the abbeys echoes the quandary for many craft brewers seeking to maintain authenticity against commercial temptations. Two decades ago, a group of abbeys formed the International Trappist Association to protect the Trappist designation from commercial brewers using monastic images to market beers. To win membership the beer must be brewed at a monastery; the business supervised by monks; and the profits used for the needs of the abbey or charity. Today, 11 members brew beer and can use the Authentic logo. Other members make products such as cheese or honey.

The abbeys have made concessions to modernity. Monks today rarely do the brewing, although they supervise it. Saint-Sixtus Abbey of Westvleteren, which used to take orders by telephone for pickup from the monastery gates, recently launched online orders and a delivery service. Some abbeys have cafes and shops. Chimay brewer Scourmont Abbey, where one monk died last year at the age of 105, has added bathroom facilities in some cells to attract overnight visitors—and potential new recruits—to retreats in the silence of the monastery, says Mr. Bordon.

Still, “it’s not a hotel,” he says. “You need to follow the rules.”

Trappists—a centuries-old Catholic order known for its strict observance, including praying seven times a day—began producing beer in Belgium at the start of the 19th century. Brothers, who usually wear simple habits, strive to live by the work of their hands, including by farming, cheese-making and brewing.



A historic photo shows monks working in the bottling room at the Saint-Sixtus Abbey’s brewery.

PHOTO: HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

By the 1990s, aging monks at Trappist monasteries focused on farmwork struggled. St. Benedict's sold off its agricultural land and was on the verge of closing.

At the same time, commercial breweries were paying royalties to some abbeys to slap their names and images on beer bottles. The secular pretenders—advertised with monastic clichés including Gregorian chants and mist-shrouded abbeys—ate into Trappist beer sales, says Jef van den Steen, a beer historian. Trappist-style beers, which vary from blondes to very dark beers, use only natural ingredients and have a higher alcohol content than many beers.

“There was a bit of a panic in Trappist abbeys that [make a living] from beer,” he says.

In 1998, eight Trappist monasteries—with six from Belgium, including St. Benedict's—created the Authentic Trappist Product label to show which beers were actual monastery products.

One monastery, Koningshoeven Abbey in the Netherlands, strayed and was ejected in 1999 after it entrusted operations to a German brewery, saying its monks were too old. It was reinstated in 2005 after monks resumed more active oversight.

Saint-Sixtus Abbey produces only as much beer as it needs to finance the abbey, making its Westvleteren beer one of the world's most sought-after. Some abbeys have developed significant commercial operations with snazzy websites. Scourmont Abbey's Chimay brand (slogan: Tasty. Meaningful. Authentic.) expanded and modernized its operations as it gained popularity in the second half of the 20th century and is now known globally. The beer pulled in 65 million euros, or about \$77 million, in revenue in 2019.



A customer carried away a crate of Westvleteren beer from the shop at the Saint-Sixtus Abbey in May.

PHOTO: KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

St. Benedict's is one of the smallest Trappist breweries in Belgium, and its community of monks has dwindled in recent years.

“When there are only a few and they are all old, no young guy will become a monk in such an abbey,” says Mr. van den Steen.

The last two monks at St. Benedict's relocated to Westmalle last year due to their advanced age, and the abbey's license to use the Authentic Trappist Product logo lapsed. Still, brewing will continue, and a new brewhouse will open this spring. The beer will be the same but the abbey's coat of arms will replace the Authentic Trappist Product logo.

Other abbeys around the world have joined the association in recent years. There are now five Belgian, two Dutch and one each from the U.S., the U.K., Italy and Austria that can use the Authentic logo.

St. Joseph's Abbey in Massachusetts, the association's U.S. member, sent two brothers to Scourmont Abbey for eight months of training to help it launch its Spencer label beer. St. Joseph's had switched from dairy farming to making jams and jellies in the 1960s, but turned to beer a decade ago because it is less labor intensive, says Father Isaac.

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The abbey has just under 50 brothers, and some monks work in the brewery, from bottling to labeling and accounts.

When Father Isaac was ready to bring his first beer to market in 2014, India pale ales were challenging Trappist beers for prestige. The style, strongly flavored of hops, isn't a typical Trappist product. "The distributors said: 'Oh, Father Isaac, come on, I need an IPA from you,'" he recalls. St. Joseph's now makes a Spencer Trappist IPA.

Despite the numbers, Father Isaac still has a personnel issue. One of the brothers who went on the training mission to Belgium became so taken with brewing that he left the abbey to work in a commercial brewery—on the monastic equivalent of sabbatical leave, he says.

Whether the man will return is a matter for him to work through with the abbot, Father Isaac says, but the monk intends to weigh in: "I want my brewer back."

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