



Lessons of history

Vander Ghinste looks to the future by paying tribute to its past.
By Paul Walsh

One of Belgian Beer & Food's aims is to tell the stories of Belgian breweries, but the truth is that we can only scratch the surface, dealing with the few that are still around today, while neglecting thousands that have been and gone, in some cases leaving barely a trace.

An example is Brasserie LeFort. Once a dominant feature in the prosperous town of Kortrijk, it sat on the city's old fortifications and sold its beer through its network of pubs in the city and surrounding area. As you'd expect, owner Felix Verscheure was a man of status and lived in an elegant townhouse adjacent to the brewery, itself one of the richest in the city.

However it seemed that his brewery's legacy would die with him.

Felix outlived his two children, and when he died in 1911 his grand-daughter Marguerite Vandamme inherited the brewery. In those repressive times that could have been the end of the story, except that she was married to Omer Vander Ghinste, who himself owned a brewery in the village of Bellegem, on

the outskirts of Kortrijk.

Omer's brewery was a much smaller concern, a local village brewery like thousands of others across Belgium. But the marriage brought Vander Ghinste a distribution network, equipment and property, and laid the foundations for the brewery that continues today as Omer Vander Ghinste, until recently known as Bockor.

Today's owner, who's also called Omer Vander Ghinste, remembers family members speaking about Brasserie LeFort with a kind of awe and respect. "It was certainly something in the town of Kortrijk, and integrating it into our brewery was a big deal. Really it's what allowed us to become who we are now."

And what better way to preserve an old legacy than by creating a new beer: Brasserie LeFort.

"Our brewers got to go off and exercise their creativity on a new product," says Nicolas Degryse the brewery's marketing manager. "It's not a recipe from that time, but we have found documents that say Brasserie LeFort was very well known for its beers of high alcohol con-



tent. That changed later in the 1880s or 1890s when taxes were increased on high alcohol beers. The brewery also made dark beers, but we don't have a lot of information about that."

Although it has 8.5 percent ABV, the beer's alcohol is not overpowering in the mouth. Instead it's a smooth, balanced, almost retiring brew, dark red with a fruity sweetness from the roasted malts, and deeper down notes of toffee and chocolate.

Omer Vander Ghinste says that restraint was an important element in the making of this beer. "After Omer (a blond beer released in 2008) we decided to look at to look at a different segment and started trying dark beers. Actually compared to blond beers there aren't many out there so we wanted to add something new. You know it's not so difficult to make a beer with roasted-malt over-powering the other flavors. We wanted something more delicate, more subtle and complex."

There is roasted malt in Brasserie LeFort but there's also pale malt, pils malt as well as wheat, an unusual ingredient

in a dark beer. "Wheat gives a softness to the beer, and when you drink it it's very smooth. Hops on the other hand play a minimal role, it's the malty, chocolate and coffee taste that come through, with the hops adding a gentle bitterness but not much more than that."

So as a tribute to the old Brasserie LeFort, you get a delicate beer, and in fact quite a modern one. "We had a blond beer of high fermentation (Omer) and now we have a brown beer of high fermentation. Normally we would have waited, but we found it so good. I don't know if it's the cleverest move. Maybe it would have been better to wait. But if you have the product and you have the story, why wait?" ■