

A NOTE ON BLACK, SPRUCE AND DANTZIG BEERS

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In investigating the origins of Black or Spruce Beer there is an unfortunate collusion of different meanings which serves to confuse the researcher. The origins of the word 'Spruce', in its meaning of smart or dandified, is actually a corruption of the old French 'Pruce' or old German 'Preussen' referring to Prussia. Originally the word was used to refer to Prussian leather used to make smart and neat looking jerkins - 'They were appareyled after the fashion of Prussia or Spruce.'¹

However, from the 16th Century onwards the term 'Spruce' was also generically used to describe various types of goods originating from the Baltic and the ports

of the Hanseatic League, including cloth, leather, flax, timber and beer. Herein lies the confusion, does the 'Spruce' cited on the label of Mather's 'Black Beer' (illustrated) refer to its historic area of origin or its ingredients? The latter is not as strange as it might at first seem for in Norway it is reported that 'pine roots or spruce chippings might be added to prevent the ale turning sour'² and that the famous (infamous?) 'Brunswick Mum' contained 'the tops of fir and birch' among its many ingredients.³

There is no doubt that such coniferous ingredients were used to flavour beer. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first usage of SPRUCE BEER around c.1500 and the first edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) contains an entry citing 'SPRUCE-BEER [from spruce a kind of fir] - Beer tinctured with the branches of fir' and even goes on to refer to an earlier author, Arbuthnot, who states that 'in ulcers of the kidneys SPRUCEBEER is a good balsamick.'

The *Dictionary of Traded Goods & Commodities* 1550 - 1820⁴ provides additional information about Spruce Beer: 'A medicinal drink believed to have antiscorbutic properties and to have an effect on the kidneys.' It could be made from a normal Malt wort or, according to Sambrook,⁵ more usually from an unhopped Treacle or Sugar wort. In either case an Essence of Spruce was then added.

19th Century Tradecards claimed that it required 'so little Trouble to make this Beer, that a Person may make a Hogshead in ten Minutes, and it will be fit to drink in a few Days.' The essence was available in shops for home brewing, along with ready-made spruce beer although no recipe for making it has been found.



The listing of spruce essence in books of Excise Rates suggests that some at least was imported. Paradoxically in the 18th & 19th centuries the essence of spruce used to concoct Spruce Beer was more likely to originate from North America rather than the Baltic with one author⁶ describing ‘An essence extracted from the twigs or sprouts of the black or the white SPRUCE fir tree used for making SPRUCE BEER.’ It is assumed that early brewers, whether in Scandinavia or Britain, simply added fir cones or twigs to the boil or fermentation but clearly by the end of the 18th Century this had been replaced by the use of essences. An essence of spruce was patented in 1772, although Spruce Beer itself has been noted as being for sale in shops as early as 1724.

To add further confusion the term ‘Black Beer’ often appears to be synonymous with ‘Dantzic Beer’, which Ogilvie⁷ describes as ‘a kind of beer manufactured at Dantzic. It is of black colour and of a syrupy consistence, and is much prized’.

There is little doubt that there was a unique beer style, emanating from Dantzic and the Baltic ports, which existed for many hundreds of years prior to the use of the name ‘DANTZIG’ on 19th Century trade cards. Writing under his Latin pen-name ‘Tabernaemontanus’, Jacob Theodor von Berzabern refers to Dantzic Beer or ‘Joppenbier’ in his herbal of 1588, describing it as ‘a beautiful brown-red and as thick as syrup’ and declaring that ‘there is more strength and nourishment in a little mug of this than a whole measure of other beers’. Any confusion arising from the title ‘Spruce Beer’ either based on its supposed origin or ingredients, or its coincidence with the term ‘Black Beer’, are later manifestations, probably arising in the 17th and 18th centuries.

We may ponder whether the use of the name ‘Dantzic’ by 19th century brewers was meant to suggest that the beer originated in the region of SPRUCE (i.e. the Baltic) or did such labels and trade cards indicate the beer was brewed in a Scandinavian manner with the flavour coming from the addition of spruce fir, cones, oils or essence - an equally possible interpretation? There is clearly an association, and it is noteworthy that Joseph Hobson & Son, a major producer of Spruce Beer in the 19th and early 20th centuries, operated from the Dantzic Brewery, Regent Street, Leeds. My concise

dictionary compounds the confusion by giving two descriptions:

Spruce Beer	A fermented liquor made from the leaves and small branches of the spruce fir
Black Beer	A kind of spruce beer made at Dantzic

According to one author⁸ by the middle of the 20th Century Spruce or Black Beer was no longer in any way a ‘beer’ and he is clear in declaring Spruce Beer is

not a beer or other brewed beverage since it contains no barley or other cereal. It is essentially fermented molasses flavoured with spruce twigs and cones. It is reported to be made (and liked!) by the fisherfolk of Newfoundland.

In its last known survivals, apparently in screw top bottles on shelves behind the bars of various Yorkshire pubs, Black Beer or Spruce Beer was a non-intoxicant syrup to be added to other spirits in the same manner as ‘Shrub’ or ‘Lovage’ with rum or gin.

I’m not sure the exact genealogy of this beer style will ever be fully understood: There was undoubtedly an ancient dark, syrupy beer originating from Dantzic and fir cones, twigs and latterly essence have been added to fermenting worts, primarily un-hopped sugar or molasses, but also to malt worts, to produce both alcoholic and non-intoxicant liquors in England since at least the 1500’s.

The conflation of ‘Spruce’ referring to products originating from the Baltic ports and ‘Spruce’ meaning the coniferous ingredients may never be untangled and the use of the ‘Dantzic’ appellation by 19th Century producers may be a genuine link with the Baltic tradition, or may have simply been a marketing device to differentiate their product from other ‘medicinal’ drinks. However, one thing seems clear - there is no link between Spruce Beer (in either of its forms) and the story that such beverages containing fir cones or spruce oils kept the drinker alert rather than becoming soporific as when drinking hopped beers, namely ‘feeling spruce’ - this is simply a transference from the original ‘fashionable’ meaning of the corrupted archaic term for Prussia.

References

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