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Trappist Command: Thou Shalt Not Buy Too Much of Our Beer --- Monks at St. Sixtus Battle Resellers of Prized Brew; Brother Joris Plays Hardball

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WESTVLETEREN, Belgium -- The Trappist monks at St. Sixtus monastery have taken vows against riches, sex and eating red meat. They speak only when necessary. But you can call them on their **beer** phone.

Monks have been brewing Westvleteren **beer** at this remote spot near the French border since 1839. Their brew, offered in strengths up to 10.2% alcohol by volume, is among the most highly prized in the world. In bars from Brussels to Boston, and online, it sells for more than \$15 for an 11-ounce bottle -- 10 times what the monks ask -- if you can get it.

For the 26 monks at St. Sixtus, however, success has brought a spiritual hangover as they fight to keep an insatiable market in tune with their life of contemplation.

The monks are doing their best to resist getting bigger. They don't advertise and don't put labels on their bottles. They haven't increased production since 1946. They sell only from their front gate. You have to make an appointment and there's a limit: two, 24-bottle cases a month. Because scarcity has created a high-priced gray market online, the monks search the net for resellers and try to get them to stop.

"We sell **beer** to live, and not vice versa," says Brother Joris, the white-robed brewery director. **Beer** lovers, however, seem to live for Westvleteren.

When Jill Nachtman, an American living in Zurich, wanted a taste recently, she called the hot line everybody calls the **beer** phone. After an hour of busy signals, she finally got through and booked a time. She drove 16 hours to pick up her **beer**. "If you factor in gas, hotel -- and the **beer** -- I spent \$20 a bottle," she says.

Until the monks installed a new switchboard and set up a system for appointments two years ago, the local phone network would sometimes crash under the weight of calls for Westvleteren. Cars lined up for miles along the flat one-lane country road that leads to the red brick monastery, as people waited to pick up their **beer**.

"This **beer** is addictive, like chocolate," said Luc Lannoo, an unemployed, 36-year-old Belgian from Ghent, about an hour away, as he loaded two cases of Westvleteren into his car at the St. Sixtus gate one morning. "I have to come every month."

Two American Web sites, Rate **Beer** and **Beer** Advocate, rank the strongest of Westvleteren's three products, a dark creamy **beer** known as "the 12," best in the world, ahead of beers including Sweden's Narke Kaggen Stormaktsporter and Minnesota's Surly Darkness. "No question, it is the holy grail of beers," says Remi Johnson, manager of the Publick House, a Boston bar that has Westvleteren on its menu but rarely in stock.

Some **beer** lovers say the excitement over Westvleteren is hype born of scarcity. "It's a very good **beer**," says Jef van den Steen, a brewer and author of a book on Trappist monks and their **beer** published in French and Dutch. "But it reminds me of the movie star you want to sleep with because she's inaccessible, even if your wife looks just as good."

Thanks to the **beer** phone, there are no more lines of cars outside the monastery now. But production remains just 60,000 cases per year, while demand is as high as ever. Westvleteren has become almost impossible to find, even in the specialist **beer** bars of Brussels and local joints around the monastery.

"I keep on asking for **beer**," says Christophe Colpaert, manager of "Cafe De Sportsfriend," a bar down the road from the monks. "They barely want to talk to me." On a recent day, a recorded message on the **beer** phone said St. Sixtus wasn't currently making appointments; the monks were fresh out of **beer**.

Increasing production is not an option, according to the 47-year-old Brother Joris, who says he abandoned a stressful career in Brussels for St. Sixtus 14 years ago. "It would interfere with our job of being a monk," he says.

Belgian monasteries like St. Sixtus started making **beer** in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which ended in 1799. The revolt's anti-Catholic purge had destroyed churches and abbeys in France and Belgium. The monks needed cash to rebuild, and **beer** was lucrative.

Trappist is a nickname for the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, who set up their own order in La Trappe, France, in the 1660s because they thought Cistercian monasteries were becoming too lax. The monks at St. Sixtus sleep in a dormitory and stay silent in the cloisters, though they speak if they need to. Today, though, Trappists are increasingly famous for making good **beer**.

Seven monasteries (six are Belgian, one, La Trappe, is Dutch) are allowed to label their **beer** as Trappist. In 1996, they set up an alliance to protect their brand. They retain lawyers in Washington and Brussels ready to sue brewers who try use the word Trappist. Every few months, Brother Joris puts on street clothes and takes the train to Brussels to meet with fellow monks to share sales and business data, and plot strategy.

The monks know their **beer** has become big business. That's fine with the brothers at Scourmont, the monastery in southern Belgium that makes the Chimay brand found in stores and bars in Europe and the U.S. They've endorsed advertising and exports, and have sales exceeding \$50 million a year. They say the jobs they create locally make the business worthy. Other monasteries, which brew names familiar to **beer** lovers such as Orval, Westmalle and Rochefort, also are happy their businesses are growing to meet demand.

Not so at St. Sixtus. Brother Joris and his fellow monks brew only a few days a month, using a recipe they've kept to themselves for around 170 years.

Two monks handle the brewing. After morning prayer, they mix hot water with malt. They add hops and sugar at noon. After boiling, the mix, sufficient to fill roughly 21,000 bottles, is fermented for up to seven days in a sterilized room. From there the **beer** is pumped to closed tanks in the basement where it rests for between five weeks and three months. Finally, it is bottled and moved along a conveyor belt into waiting cases. Monks at St. Sixtus used to brew by hand, but nothing in the rules of the order discourages technology, so they've plowed profits into productivity-enhancing equipment. St. Sixtus built its current brewhouse in 1989 with expert advice from the company then known as Artois Breweries.

In the 1980s, the monks even debated whether they should continue making something from which people can get drunk. "There is no dishonor in brewing **beer** for a living. We are monks of the West: moderation is a key word in our asceticism," says Brother Joris in a separate, email interview. "We decided to stick to our traditional skills instead of breeding rabbits."

The result is a brew with a slightly sweet, heavily alcoholic, fruity aftertaste.

One day recently, the wiry, sandy-haired Brother Joris returned to his office in the monastery after evening prayers. He flipped on his computer and went online to hunt for resellers and ask them to desist. "Most of the time, they agree to withdraw their offer," he says. Last year, St. Sixtus filed a complaint with the government against two companies that refused -- BelgianFood.com, a Web site that sells **beer**, cheese, chocolate and other niche products, and Beermania, a Brussels **beer** shop that also sells online. Both offer Westvleteren at around \$18 a bottle.

"I'm not making a lot of money and I pay my taxes," says BelgianFood.com owner Bruno Dourcy. "You can only buy two cases at once, you know." Mr. Dourcy makes monthly two-hour car trips from his home in eastern Belgium.

"Seek the Kingdom of God first, and all these things will be given to you," counters Brother Joris, quoting from the Bible, adding that it refers only to things you really need. "So if you can't have it, possibly you do not really need it."

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