

Body and Soul of a Good Pint: A Note on Nordic Brewing and the Magic of Yeast

BESJELET. THERE IS NO EASY English translation for this Norwegian term. It means something like “ensoulment.” Or maybe “animation,” with the original Latin sense of *animus*, “soul.” I’ve heard the word used by brewers I’ve worked with to describe what their yeast does as it goes about making beer. The yeast is not just a unicellular fungus consuming sugar, it’s something much more enigmatic, mystical even—an evanescence, a thriving, a transformation that brewers speak of in reverential tones.

Brewers, it seems, develop a personal relationship with their yeasts, using the same one again and again, in brew after brew, in sealed and in open spaces. I began fieldwork with Nordic brewers two years ago, curious about how drink (and food, too) has emerged on the Nordic scene as something downright thrilling. I expected to investigate the links between brewers and consumers and the quest for authenticity, a kind of cultural shabby-chic packaging of something uniquely and evocatively Nordic, and almost exclusively hipster. I had not envisioned my work as what it has become—an ethnography of a relationship between the unseen world of yeast and the hard physical labor humans expend in creating the perfect mood for the yeast to thrive and do the work.

Yeast, that energetic single-cell fungus, and humans have a long history, and together they have created some of the mainstays of civilization. The ancient Egyptians loved their beer and left ample evidence of that affection—hymns to the goddesses of beer, wooden models of people engaged in making it, and imposing vessels that provided the vehicle for fermentation. These wide-mouthed beer jugs were made of unglazed and porous clay, a surface that practically invites wild yeasts to come in and get to work, and as testament to their effectiveness, modern archaeologists have found embedded in them yeast cells that survived the millennia. Ancient peoples also loved their bread, another dimension of this magic of fermentation and yeast. Yeast, the busy fungus that makes bread dough rise as it reacts

with the sugars in the flour, is what imparts the airy fluff. The happy partnership of beer and bread was not lost on the ancients: in 2018 archaeologists announced the discovery of a site at Tell Edfu, about four hundred miles south of Cairo, dating from about 2400 BCE, where both beer and bread were made. I’m not sure how sustaining a diet of beer and bread would be, but I might be willing to try it.

Drawn into the mysterious world of yeast, I found myself immersed in unexpected flashes of childhood memories—the aroma of the crumbled yeast from my grandmother’s kitchen in her summer house in Alexandria, still fresh in my sensory memory. I loved the way she shared with me her freshly baked bread, homemade orange marmalade, and builder’s tea, a



FIGURE 1: *Snapshot of the author’s maternal grandmother.*
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

strong black concoction tempered with lots of milk and sugar, the traditional down-home pick-me-up drink of British workmen.

She bought the little cakes of fresh yeast from a local baker—pale beige, soft and crumbly, wrapped in cheese paper, with the texture of a pliable pencil eraser. She would let me break the yeast into small pieces first, then drop the softened bits into the warm water. What sticks in my mind is the color of the water turning a transparent gray, the warmth and fragrance that filled the kitchen, the aroma of something delicious in the making. What I also remember are the quiet moments when the dough was taken aside to a warm spot—the same familiar corner in the kitchen, where it would rest for a couple of hours or overnight, fermenting in peace. Any disturbance and the dough would collapse.

Yeast is the heart of a brewery, the revered, mysterious substance that makes it all happen. In a craft brewery in Oslo I hear about the ethereal soul of the yeast, while in a farm brewery, it is all about the science.

Magnus, Simon, and Cameron are the brewers in Schouskjelleren Microbrewery. Three men with very different backgrounds and brewing histories. Magnus is from a small Norwegian town on the border with Sweden. His grandfather was a passionate brewer. Magnus used to be a baker. Simon is from Grenoble and left his career in finance in Los Angeles to follow the “magic of fermentation.” Then there is Cameron. He fell in love with a Norwegian girl, left his home in Australia, and settled in Oslo.

The three brewers found each other and one of the coolest spots in Oslo. They brew for Nevzat Arıkan. Nevzat came to Norway as a Kurdish refugee in the 1980s. He began working in bars and today is one of the two largest restaurant owners in Oslo. His brewery—Schouskjelleren Microbrewery—is located in what used to be the packaging wing of Oslo’s first brewery, founded in 1800 but now defunct. What used to be an industrial no-go zone—Grunerløkka—is today the trendiest, hippist hub in Oslo. A neighborhood with locally sourced brunch spots, yoga studios, artisanal bread, curated second-hand clothing, fair-trade coffee shops—and a couple of microbreweries.

With Magnus, Simon, and Cameron, I am struck by the sheer calm, order, and, it seems, happiness that fill the space as they go about their work. But an intense concentration and demanding physical labor are also required to check that all is well, to adjust, if necessary, to ensure that the color is just right, the funkiness just so. Magnus repeats an adage I have heard from all the brewers I have interviewed—including those not mentioned in this article—“We don’t make beer; we simply gather the ingredients in the right place. The yeast makes the beer.” Simon nods and points to a batch he has brewed. “It is alive,” he says of his beer fermenting in an aged barrel that once contained Armagnac, “it is like any other living being.” He lifts the tap on top of the barrel and asks me to smell, then he offers me a glass. “It is going to be one of the beers for this Christmas,” he tells me. I taste deliciousness—caramel, toast, softness. I love my job. “The yeast is working hard, but swimming freely and not stressed,” he smiles.



FIGURE 2: From industrial no-go zone to a microbrewery haven.

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FIGURE 3: Schouskjelleren Microbrewery is in the courtyard of what used to be Oslo’s first industrial brewery, Schous Byggeri.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BJØRN-ERIK LEERBERG © 2019



FIGURE 4: Simon's aged barrel, where the yeast is swimming freely.
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Yeast, this extraordinary life form that reworks its allies and hosts, and has the power to delight consumers, is approached differently in a brewery that has sprung up on a family farm. On a warm, sunny day in early May, the pastoral scene of rolling hills and beautiful fruit orchards in the village of Gvarv might be mistaken for a wine district in France or Italy, but for the snow-covered mountaintops on the horizon. Gvarv is in Telemark, a county two hours' drive southwest of Oslo, known as the birthplace of skiing, violent Norse battles, and fruits. I am here to meet Ingeborg Lindheim and Eivin Eilertsen,

owners of the Lindheim Ølkompani, the Lindheim Beer Company.

For three generations, the Lindheim family has owned and managed acres of fruit orchards and berry bushes. Ingeborg Lindheim is *odelsjente*—"heir girl"—the firstborn, so she inherited the land and farm when her parents retired. Ingeborg and her husband, Eivin Eilertsen, wanted to live off the farm, but that required finding a new use for their plums, apples, cherries, blackcurrants, and raspberries. Inspired by the flourishing craft beer industry in the United States, brewers in Belgium who incorporate methods from centuries ago, and a desire to create deliciousness, they invent their own brews, adding their hand-picked harvest to the mix.

But first, they had to learn to make beer. On that mission, in 2013, they traveled to San Diego, where Ingeborg visited a supplier of brewing equipment. Unassumingly, she asked if the supplier could recommend a brewer who might be able to help them set up the brewery. Ingeborg went to the first one on the list the supplier gave her and he promised to send his best people over to Gvarv. "They came all the way [from California] to Lindheim," Eivin recalls. "After rigging up the tanks, kettles, and hoses in the barn for us, one of them turns back on his way out the door. Looks me straight in the eyes, pokes me in the chest, and says, 'Take care of your yeast.'" This stayed with Eivin. Not in an otherworldly sort of way, as I expected. He laughs at my excitement about the yeast's spirit, the *besjelet*. "It is science," he says. Crafting to perfection drives Eivin; and for this he looks to the quantifiable, the practical—science and the pulse of the market.

Water, yeast, malt, and hops are the conventional ingredients for brewing beer, and Eivin brews what he calls "regular pints." This is the beer that is brewed in the steel tanks and kettles that were set up in 2014. But what particularly interests me is the regular pint's wilder cousin. Lambic, a protected name, is exclusively brewed in Belgium. The U.S. version of this brew is "coolship ale," and in Norway it is spontaneously fermented beer. Herein lies Eivin's passion. The yeast is not added to the beer when brewing; instead the wort—the beer starter—is cooled in an open vat covered with a fine mesh net, under a wooden roof, so that the microorganisms from the air and from the wooden structure in the barn drop into the fusion, reminiscent of ancient techniques that depended on the wild yeasts finding their way into the brew. After cooling, Eivin transfers the wort to oak barrels—barrels that often carry their own yeasts, creating a kind of spontaneous fermentation.

On that sunny May day, barrels from Domaine Drouhin—the esteemed Oregon winery—had just arrived for Lindheim's version of a sour ale. Eivin lifts up the plastic cork on top of the



FIGURE 5: *The Lindheim fruit trees.*
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FIGURE 6: *Entrance to the Lindheim store and brewery.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY NEFISSA NAGUIB © 2019



FIGURE 7: *The spontaneously fermenting brew, covered with a fine net so that microorganisms can drop freely into the fusion.*

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barrel from Oregon, and he puts his nose in. A confident smile, but also one of anticipation for what will be a future ale. We move to the barn. In the cellar are rows of stacked barrels, one on top of the other. Ales are passing time aging in oak barrels that once contained red wine from Tuscany, Muscatel from a winery on the Peninsula of Setúbal, and Pinot Noir from Oregon. Inspired by winemakers and Lambic brewers, Eivin sees oak barrels as vessels for old and new recipes, where ale can go wild and provide distinctive pints. The oak, along with the Gvarv fruits and berries Eivin adds, creates distinctive, unique flavors. Eivin explains how the harmony between the brew and the wood will shape the brew, converting sugars into alcohol, producing complexities of flavors and aromas. He opens the top of a Tuscan barrel. Because of the porousness of the barrels, some of the brew disappears during the three-year aging process. Every so often Eivin checks to gauge how much liquid has evaporated “into the heavens. They call it *angel share*,” he explains. Not much has disappeared this time, and he does not have to top up to avoid oxidation.

Here comes a pleasurable part of research—degustation. Eivin fills a couple of glasses. I know that at this point, well short of maturation, the true distinctions of the brew can’t be judged. But my nose tells me that this is really wonderful stuff, and that as it ages, it will mellow into a rich and fruity-berry complexity. If it seems as if I am celebrating these ales,

it is because I am—from almost see-through to deep yellow, and with different degrees of intensity, mellowness with distinct hints of fruits to dry acidity. “These beers are not for chugging, they are specialized to go beautifully with food—especially cheese”; Eivin’s other passion is food.

Hoping his ales impart traces of the past contents of the barrels, Eivin follows closely the different effects the different yeasts in the barrels have on his brew. Ultimately, he wants to extract his own yeast—Lindheim yeast strain. Does he want a product that cannot be produced anywhere else in world, “a certain Norwegian something? *Terroir*?” I ask. Eivin shakes his head, “My aim has never been to go back in time and make something typically Norwegian by only using locally produced ingredients. I want to make a living from making the best beer. To do that I will use the best from Norway. Lindheim cherries are the best and our airborne microbes are local. But—most definitely—barley, malt, and oak barrels are best from elsewhere.”

Undeniably, the brew depends on that certain inspirational *something* from beyond, but there is also “the Nordic something.” Here on this farm, with the fruit growing on the trees and bushes tended by this family for three generations, with the microbes from the aged timber of the barns and from the very air—it all ends up in the mix. Perhaps it is the connection with the earth that defines the brew.

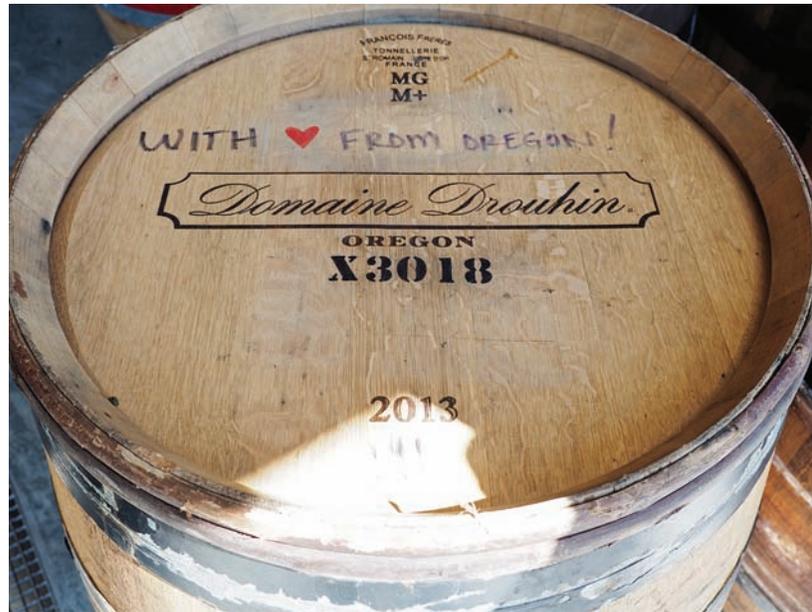


FIGURE 8: A wine barrel from Oregon, waiting to go wild with Lindheim ale.

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I had earlier scribbled the term “curated *terroir*” in my notebook, and I asked Eivin if he thought that might capture something of what goes on here in his brewery. “For excellence and to stay relevant for the market I look to science. Still the beer is brewed here at Lindheim.” There is a pause. “Curated *terroir*. Why not?”

Fermentation is an ontological speculation about an unstable thing on the brink of rot—instead it is multiplying, spreading, and springing; an aliveness as real as that of a human or a plant—*besjelet*. Yes, there is something ephemeral in the saga of fermentation—floating, clinging, dying. But, like all living things, it is also rooted in a place, its *terroir*. There is a great deal of labor that goes into creating this *terroir*. On any given day the brewers in Schousjcelleren and Lindheim are at work early in the morning moving tons of barley and other raw materials. They spend hours testing and controlling their yeast, looking out for leakage in the barrels, scrubbing drains and floors, cleaning kettles and fermenters, and doing the paperwork. Brewers work incessantly to keep their yeast happy. A labor of love, as it were. The yeast, it seems, is the mediator, the busy go-between that unites body and soul to create a beautiful brew.

I went to visit Magnus to tell him about my trip to Lindheim. He was tidying up a spot in the brewery for a microscope he ordered. Getting yeast to ferment readily available sugar is easy, he tells me. However, what Magnus wants to do is study yeast cells. “It is the cells that are the agents that

transform sugar into carbon dioxide, an alcohol. I want to learn how the yeast lives.” I love that. I love the idea that here is a master brewer who wonders about the life of his yeast.

I chronicled moments in two breweries by entering sideways from my grandma’s kitchen in Alexandria. As I think back to the dough in a quiet corner in the kitchen and forward to the brew fermenting in the barrel, I realize that everything will happen anyway, but the point of being a brewer or a baker is that one can manipulate this marvelous process, and craft it, control it, and delight in it. ☺

Acknowledgments

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an anthropology that provides us with the academic freedom of exploration.

We decided to create a new school of anthropological engagement, which we call Anthropology of Momentums. This article is part of such critical experiment aimed at discovering how to convey those enraptured moments that draw us to our field sites, instead of sanitizing such experiences and reducing them to an act of translation. The aim is to allow ourselves to be *scientifically* caught up in the enchantment of anthropological fieldwork.

At the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Aarhus, I was fortunate to attend a fermentation workshop

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I dedicate this piece to my maternal grandmother, Nefissa Selim, in loving memory.