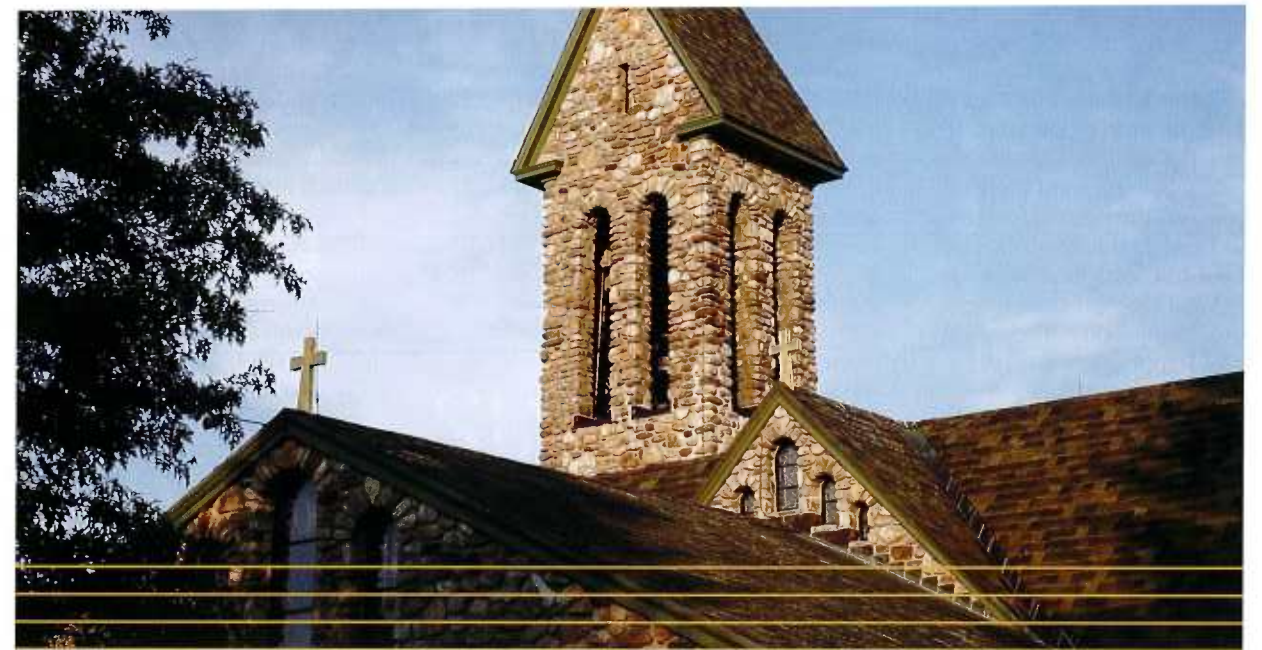
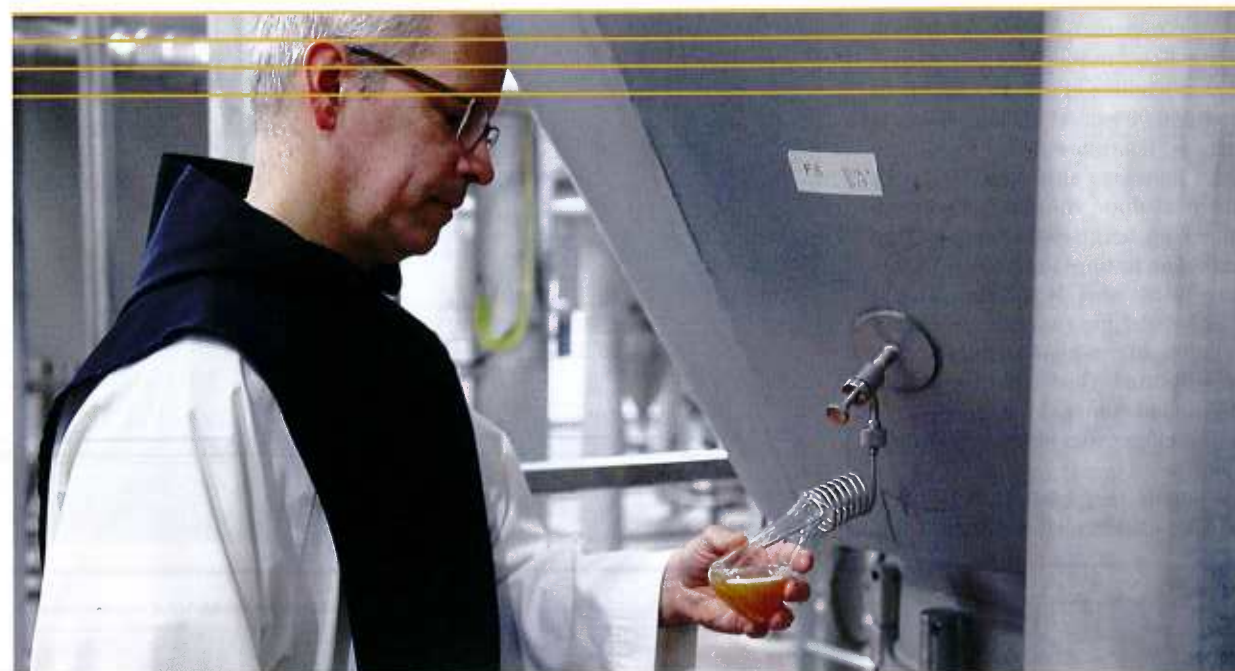




A BREW FOR THE CENTURIES: AMERICA'S FIRST TRAPPIST ALE

BY HORST DORNBUSCH



As more and more new breweries come online in the American beer market, and as established breweries are expanding their portfolios, an ever-increasing avalanche of new beers is becoming available for adventurous consumers to try. However, one recently released beer stands apart from all of these new entries: the first American Trappist ale. Named Spencer Trappist Ale, it is brewed by the Saint Joseph's Abbey in the small central Massachusetts town of Spencer, an hour's drive west of Boston.



In May 2012, the International Trappist Association (ITA; see sidebar on page 86) convened to reach a surprise decision that immediately reverberated around the world of beer. It announced the opening of a new Trappist brewery, the Abtei Engelszell in Engelhartzell, Austria. That monastery was founded in 1293 and elevated to an abbey in 1925. Henceforth, it would join the small circle of only seven Trappist breweries of long standing: the Abbaye Notre-Dame d'Orval (Orval, founded in 1533); the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Saint-Rémy (Rochefort, founded in 1595); the Sint-Benedictusabdij de Achelse Kluis (Achel, founded in 1686); the Abdij Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van het Heilig Hart van Jezus (Westmalle, founded in 1794); the Sint-Sixtusabdij (Westvleteren, founded in 1831); the Abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont (Chimay, founded in 1850); and the Abdij Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Koningshoeven (La Trappe/De Koningshoeven near Tilburg, founded in 1884). While the first six of these are located in Belgium, De Koningshoeven is across the border in the Netherlands. Engelszell thus became the world's eighth producer of Trappist beers, and only the second one outside of Belgium.

The Trappists, however, were not done yet! In December 2013, the ITA bestowed the brewing privilege to two more abbeys. One was the Abdij Maria Toevlucht, founded in 1900 in Zundert, on the Dutch side of the Belgian-Dutch border, not far from Antwerp. The other was—and this was a big newsmaker—the Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Mass.

There may even be an 11th Trappist brewery in the offing, the Abbaye du Mont des Cats, in Godewaersvelde, on the French

side of the Belgian-French border, a few miles from Dunkirk. This abbey currently has its *Bière du Mont des Cats* brewed by Chimay, but there are reports that it may establish its own beer-making facility soon. To date, only Saint Joseph's, among all of the Trappist breweries, old and new, is far from the Trappists' homeland, some 3,500 miles across the Pond.

CHANGING TIMES

The ITA does not give out its brewing designations lightly, but admittedly, "Monks live apart from the world but are unable to avoid the world's turbulence in any time," according to the Spencer Brewery website. As Abbot Damian Carr recently told an NPR reporter, the monks at Spencer do not get out often. "We're not in parishes," said Damian, "we don't teach in schools, we don't go to the missions." Of late, however, the "turbulence" of the secular world has been permeating—slowly but steadily—the secluded monastery walls of Saint Joseph's. While the Spencer monastic community once numbered well over 100, many of them young recruits, the number of monks currently living there has dwindled to 66. Because fewer and fewer young people are drawn to the monastic life these days, not enough monks are available to do the required jobs in such physically demanding trades as masonry, roofing, plumbing, carpentry, and landscaping.

As brewing director Brother Isaac T. Keeley points out, "Many of our brothers are now aging. Some are on canes, and some are in the infirmary." A labor shortage exists at the monastery, and filling that void with outside contractors is expensive. Beer mak-

ing, as the Trappist abbeys in Europe have demonstrated, became an obvious choice for placing the Spencer Abbey on sounder financial footing.

BEER AND PRAYER

The current abbey in Massachusetts started as the Abbaye Petit Clairvaux, near Tracadie, Nova Scotia, in 1825. After two disastrous fires there in 1892 and 1896, the monks relocated to Rhode Island in 1900. The monks moved to Spencer in 1950, after another fire had destroyed their Rhode Island home. Until now, the Abbey in Spencer had been self-sufficient, relying mostly on making jams and liturgical vestments for its income.

At the time the ITA made its decision about Spencer, though, the brewery was already fully operational. This is because the idea of making beer at Spencer evolved more than a decade ago; and planning for the facility started in earnest, completely *sub rosa*, some five years ago, when only a few "outside" people—this author among them—were taken into the monks' confidence to give advice. Where there was once a quiet meadow, there is now a shiny, elegant, stainless-steel-and-glass, 36,000-square-foot brewing plant, next to the monastery's central heating plant, the "energy center." The system inside this modern building is a fully automated 50-bbl Krones-Steinecker brewhouse, complete with a large fermentation cellar and a sophisticated Krones-Kosme bottling line. Large lettering over the entrance to the plant proudly proclaims the official name of the place, The Spencer Brewery. Though the Spencer beer is an ale, the brewhouse configuration is typically German, with a mash kettle for a fairly thin



Brewmaster Hubert de Halleux, Brother Isaac T. Keeley, journalist Ben Vinken, and Abbot Damian Carr discuss the historic brewery.

single-infusion mash that is slurry-pumped into a lauter tun, from where the wort flows back to the kettle for a boil. The wort is then clarified in a separate whirlpool.

Abbot Damian explains the monks' equipment choice: "When we planned this facility, we said let's build it to last 50 to 100 years so that it will be here for the next generation and the one after that, and so on. We went for a 50-bbl brewhouse because, according to our calculations, it would give us sufficient capacity to create the income we need for the abbey and its charities. Eventually, we want to produce about 10,000 barrels annually, but we must be able to do so within our work schedule."

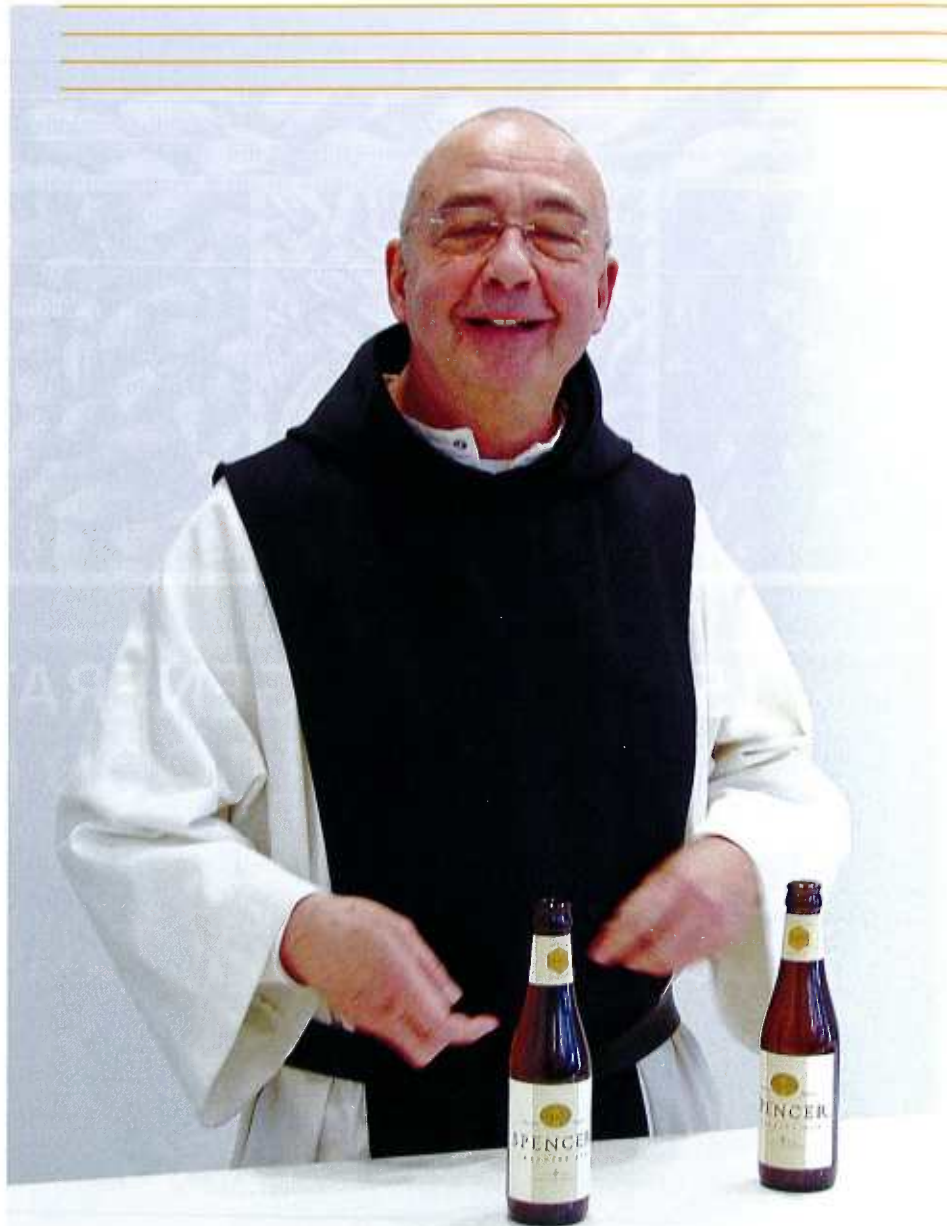
The work schedule at Spencer is true to the rules of *ora et labora* (pray and work) laid out by the order's founder, Saint Benedict, in 510 AD. The monks rise at 3:10 a.m. and retire for the night at 8 p.m. They spend most of the morning hours in prayer until work starts at 9 a.m. The time between 12:15 and 2 p.m. is devoted to a meal, contemplation, and more prayer. Work resumes shortly after 2 p.m. and ends at 4:30 p.m. The rest of the day is once again devoted mostly to prayer.

However, Saint Benedict also insisted that, even in a life of silence, seclusion, and plenty of manual labor, there is always room for a good beer. The founder of the Order of Strict Observance, Père Rancé, emphatically confirmed that point in his writings in the 17th century. Yet, within the Trappists' prescribed daily rhythm, there is no time for the monks at Spencer to chase one batch after another through their system. There is barely enough time for a single brew per day, but with a 50-bbl brewhouse, the monks can reach their annual target of 10,000 barrels with roughly 200 brew days per year. As Brother Isaac elaborates: "A 50-barrel system is objectively oversized for our projected output, but the rest of the system, including the cellar, is tailored exactly to get us to our intended volume."

AN "AMERICAN" TRAPPIST ALE

Currently, the Saint Joseph's Abbey makes only one beer, Spencer Trappist Ale, and there are no plans, for years to come, to add more beers to the portfolio. As Isaac suggests, the monks still have to fully master the craft of brewing. However, this ale is not what one would expect from a Trappist brewery. It's not a blonde, not a dubbel, not a tripel. While Trappist blondes tend to have a very clean, almost lager-like profile with an alcohol range of about 6.5 to 7 percent ABV, dubbels tend to be brown to deep sepia, with slightly malty, sweet, chocolate-like aromas, fruity esters, a mild hoppiness, and an ABV of perhaps 6.5 to 7.5 percent. Tripels—consid-

"We decided to make an 'American' Trappist ale. This meant we had to reinterpret a refectory beer, especially if we were going to share it with the American public."



Brother Isaac



Left: The Spencer Brewery has a 50-barrel brewhouse.
Right: Initially, the beer will be available in Massachusetts only.

ered the crown jewels of Belgian abbey-style brewing—are generally pale to medium-amber with complex aromas and a substantial ABV of 7 percent and above.

As a broad generalization, all classic Trappist beers tend to be rather strong and bottle-conditioned. They frequently contain brewing sugar to bump up their original gravity, alcohol, and residual sweetness. When poured, they have a dense, attractive, long-lasting, “mousseux” head. Their aroma is invariably spicy, not from spices but from the Trappists’ proprietary yeast strains—with the possible exception of Rochefort ales, rumored to also contain a smidgen of coriander.

The monks at Saint Joseph’s, however, decided to take a completely different stylistic approach. Instead of following the traditional Trappist regimen of blondes, dubbels, and tripels, which they considered too sweet or too alcoholic, they settled on a traditional Trappist style that is generally not available to the public. They chose a *Patersvaatje* (literally, a friar’s barrel) as their lead beer, a style that Trappists often make just for their own consumption. Brother Isaac refers to it as a “refectory ale” (literally, a dining hall ale) designed to stimulate the appetite. The first *Patersvaatje* was apparently brewed in Achel in 1852, and the Spencer *Patersvaatje* is a variant of that monastic table beer.

Though Brother Isaac insists that the Spencer Trappist Ale is “less alcoholic”—

which is, of course, a relative term within the context of Belgian abbey beers—it still has an ABV of 6.5 percent, by design. “When you look at all the Trappist beers, each beer is really different,” he said. “In a sense, Trappist beer is more of a collection of brews than a style. Therefore, we said, we have to be distinct. We did not want to just imitate what was already out there. Who would need this? Nor did we want to come out with a very big beer the first time around. Instead, we decided to make an ‘American’ Trappist ale. This meant we had to reinterpret a refectory beer, especially if we were going to share it with the American public. Because we wanted the beer to be accessible, we went for an alcohol content in the mid-range of the category.”

When asked if he had a benchmark for the concept or if the Spencer monks started from scratch, Brother Isaac explained, “This was a bit of a challenge, because in our monastery, we drink alcohol only on big feast days; and then our beverage of choice has always been wine. As for beer, American lagers have never been popular in our group. In other words, we were constructing a beer that had to be accessible and delicious enough to appeal to persons who consider themselves wine drinkers, both inside our monastery and in the public.”

Hubert de Halleux, the (secular) Belgian brewmaster for Spencer, explained, “We wanted something simple, but complex. Just

because the recipe is simple does not mean that the beer cannot be complex.” De Halleux has extensive prior experience with start-up breweries from Ukraine, to Russia, to Burkina Faso, to Nigeria.

The Spencer brew is golden-hued and full-bodied, unfiltered, and mildly turbid, with a distinct spiciness of black pepper. It is very refreshing, with rich aromas from Willamette up-front, and a noticeable but restrained 24 IBU hop component from Nugget in the finish. The base malt comes from Canada, the specialty malt from the United States, and the hops from the Yakima Valley. The water is 18,000-year-old, mineral-rich, glacial melt water from the Abbey’s own well. Only the yeast is an import from the Old World.

The Spencer yeast strain gives the brew its unique, spicy flavor and easy drinkability. “In Belgium, we did test brews of our recipe, using several different types of yeast,” said Brother Isaac. “We then did blind taste tests with several brothers. We unanimously preferred the same test batch, which turned out to be the one brewed with our house yeast. To our surprise, we all picked the tried-and-true microbe that had worked so well for us in the past in establishing the reputation of our Trappist brands. Naturally, this strain became the one for us to use in Spencer, too.” A seasoned palate may discover that the flavor and aroma profile of this yeast is, indeed, reminiscent of the taste of Chimay ales.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The official name of the Trappist order is the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance. The Trappist movement evolved in the late 17th century under Abbot Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé in the Cistercian Abbaye Notre-Dame de La Trappe, in Normandy, France. The Cistercians, in turn, are a variant of the Benedictine Order of monks and nuns, which started in Cîteaux, Burgundy, in 1098.

The Cistercians take their vows of obedience, stability in the community, and conversion of life seriously. They adhere rigidly to the original rules of monastic life as laid down by Saint Benedict in 510. After the French Revolution in 1789, and the secularization of church property that followed, Trappists were expelled from France. Many of them moved north to the Flemish- and French-speaking regions of Brabant in what was to become Belgium. There, they set up new monastery-breweries, many of which still produce beer to this very day.

Today, there are some 2,000 Trappist monks living in roughly 100 abbeys. Eighteen of these abbeys—Achel, Brecht, Brialmont, Clairefontaine, Klaarland, Orval, Rochefort, Scourmont Lez Chimay, Soleilmont, Westmalle, and Westvleteren in Belgium; Echt-Tegelen, Tilburg, and Zundert in The Netherlands; Engelszell in Austria; Mariawald in Germany; Mont des Cats in France; and Spencer in the U.S.—have formed the International Trappist Association (ITA). According to the website www.trappist.be, these monasteries generate their income primarily from the production and sale of such diverse items as beer, bread, biscuits, candles, ceramics, cheese, chocolate, cleaning agents, flags, greeting cards, honey, liqueurs, preserves, shampoo, soap, liturgical vestments, and wine. They use their earnings to provide for the monasteries' material needs, as well as for social works.

MARKETING SAINT JOSEPH'S BREW

While many new craft breweries have trouble finding suitable distributors, the Saint Joseph's Abbey had no such problem. On the contrary, one group of distributors, organized as the Massachusetts Beverage Alliance (MBA), was eager to sign a distribution agreement for the first American Trappist ale even before the beer was available for tasting.

"The uniqueness of being the first Trappist brewery in the U.S. obviously weighed a lot in our decision to court these guys," Brian Murphy, the MBA's director of sales and marketing, told the *Boston Globe*. "I just felt like it was a risk worth taking. Luckily, the beer is excellent."

The initial release of the Spencer Trappist Ale is in packs of four 33-ml (11.2 fl. oz.) bottles only. An SKU expansion into a champagne-corked dinner bottle is also under consideration. Initially, the beer will be available in Massachusetts only, but distribution into other markets is part of the plan, as the brewery ramps up to full production. The MBA hopes to move about 4,000 barrels of the brew in 2014 in the Massachusetts market.

Trappist beers simply have a well-nurtured reputation in world markets, in spite of their retail pricing being well above that of most other beers. The ITA has been clever in maintaining a relative scarcity of its monastic brews by operating effectively like a closely-held corporation. Trappist ales even enjoy legal protection, because a Belgian court decision handed down in 1962 stipulates that only breweries that are officially approved by the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance may call their beers *Trappistenbier* (Flemish) or *Bière des Pères Trappistes* (French). Secular breweries that make Trappist-like beers must legally label their products *Abdijbier* (Flemish) or *Bière d'Abbaye* (French). Only ITA-approved beers may legally carry the "Authentic Trappist Product" logo on their labels. The license for the logo is valid for five years, after which a monastery brewery must apply for an extension.

In addition, the ITA places several important restrictions on its breweries: First, all Trappist ales must be brewed on monastery premises—"intra muros" (within the walls)—either by the monks themselves or by secular staff working under the supervision of the monks. De Halleux is such a staff brewer. Hubert's work force consists of five younger monks from the Spencer cloistered community, two of whom have spent time in Chimay and other Belgian Trappist breweries to learn about

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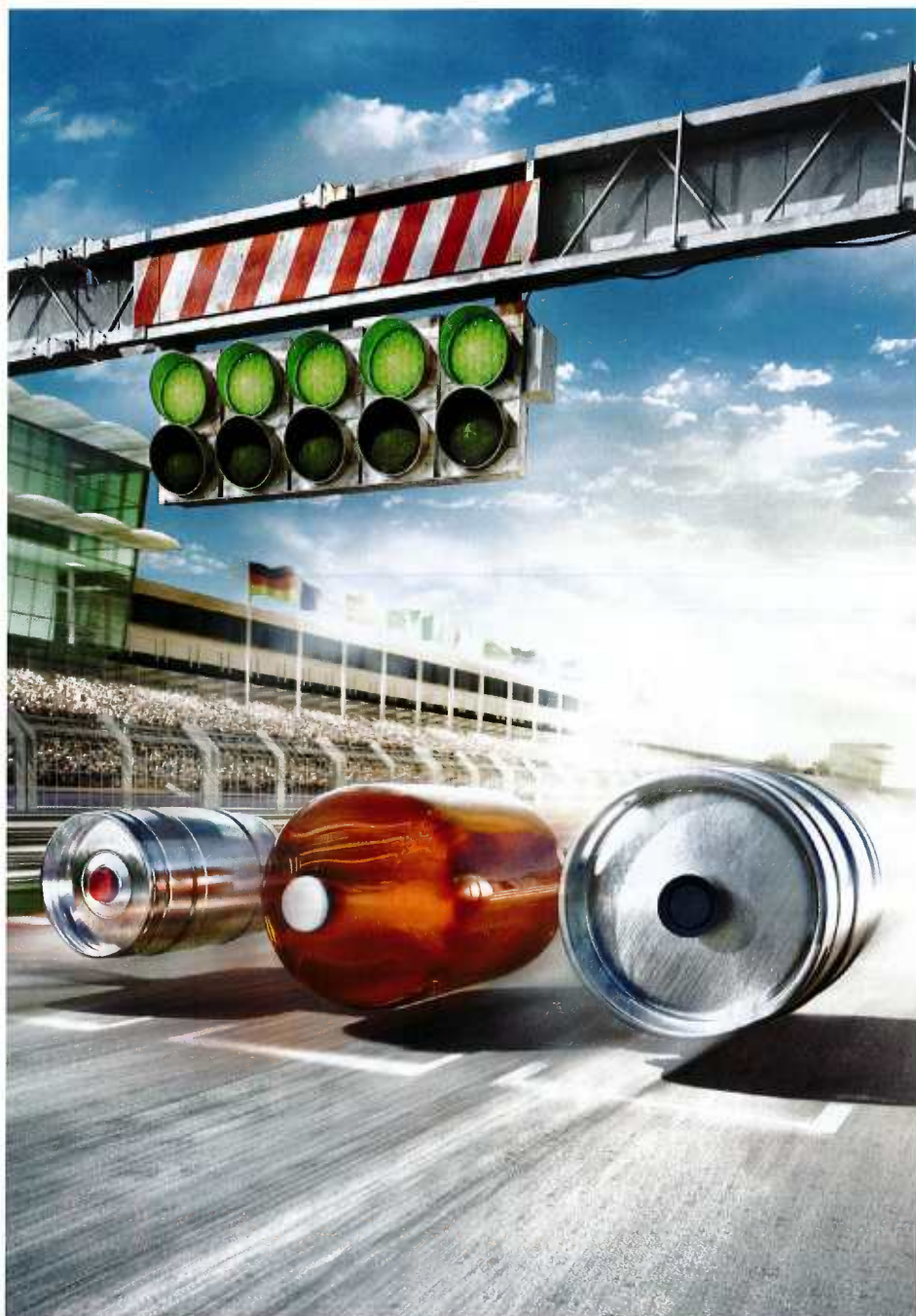


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brewhouse, cellar, and bottling work. The other three monks specialize in warehousing, packaging, and logistics, as well as accounting and finance.

Trappist abbeys may sell their beers only to maintain their monasteries, as well as to support their charities. Trappists are not allowed to pursue brewing just to maximize profits. The ITA insists that all advertising and communication issued by Trappist breweries are characterized, according to the website www.trappist.be, “by honesty, soberness and a modesty proper to the religious setting in which the beer is brewed.”

Such restrictions could drive any secular marketing manager around the bend! The Spencer Abbey has resolved its marketing issues by forming an “inside” committee of monks with the impressive name of “Monastic Marketing Task Force,” and by relying on the “outside” assistance of wholesale distributors and their marketing staff. As Brother Isaac explains, the committee consists of “artists, academics, and intellectuals,” whose task is to develop packaging systems, brochures, and POS materials. In terms of a value proposition—given the “mission” of the Spencer ale as a funding device for the monastery rather than a pure profit-maker—it is priced well above the average American craft beer. However, because it does not need to be shipped across the ocean, as brewmaster de Halleux points out, “The Spencer brew costs the consumer about 20-percent less than an imported Trappist beer, which makes it the cheapest Trappist beer on the market.”

As any marketing professional knows, when you are competing for your customers’ attention in a crowded marketplace, the key to success is differentiation and a unique story—after quality, of course. With its unusual tale of origin, its attractive price-positioning, and its singular moniker as the only American Trappist brew on the market, the Spencer ale comes out of the starting gate with some of the best inherent branding opportunities of any beer...almost without trying.

Horst Dornbusch is a consultant in the international brewing industry, an international beer judge, and the author of several books on beer, including *PROST! The Story of German Beer* (1997), *Altbier* (1998), *Bavarian Helles* (2000), and *Biersorten der Brauwelt* (2014). He is also the associate editor of *The Oxford Companion to Beer* (2010), as well as a frequent contributor to beer journals in Europe and North America.