

Food Atlas Entry

Barett Poley

Chimay - Belgium

Nestled in the center of Belgium is a Monastery filled with Monks. Men of the cloth who have devoted their entire lives to following the “Rule of St. Benedict”, a set of religious rules and edicts for Roman Catholic Monks, these Brothers in particular call themselves “Trappists”. The Rule of St. Benedict focuses on a balanced life, filled with prayer, reflection, and work of one’s own hands - but none of these things are meant to take more time than any other. In essence, they, like the monks of many other religious groups all over the world, seek balance above all things. Unlike *most* monks, however, these monks are famous for the brewing of high-quality beers. Contrary to contemporary belief, Catholics are not ‘puritan’ Christians. Drinking is not at all forbidden, and is actually quite a cultural cornerstone, considering the consecrated wine that is drunk by congregants each Sunday. The Brother Monks not only brew, and drink, the Trappist Ales they create, they also make sure to keep enough to sell to the outside world. They don’t sell a lot of their beer, and try to profit just enough to pay their bills. Not only are these beers some of the best beers in the world, they’re so good that they’re actually frequently faked. Just like shoes, purses, and watches, fraudsters have gotten the idea to create unauthorized copies of these beers. This can be difficult for the brewers, as spiritually they aren’t allowed to brew more than their bills demand, meaning it can be hard for them to keep up with the mass-production of faked Trappist beer. Unfortunately, there are even cases of fake or knock-off beer being sold for greater prices than the real stuff, usually on the secondary market.

Thankfully, these monks are not afraid of modernizing, despite their centuries-old recipe. They have taken steps to not only protect their beers physically, by hiring outside marketers, supporting their local economies, and making jobs in their towns, but also scientifically. Commissioned by the monks, in conglomeration with the E.U, scientists are devising ways to “fingerprint” and identify genuine Trappist Ales. This lets people know that they’re buying genuine monk-made products, and also helps to squash the budding criminal secondary market. This economy, and this idea of creating jobs in their own towns is nothing new. It’s a very old way of doing things, and is connected to the Charismatic movement within the Church. Thanks to the Monks’ retention of the old ways of doing things - by utilizing Charismatic Economies to support those in their local area, which has led to the support of the aforementioned scientists and marketers - they are able to deal with brand new threats. These Monks have become not only important to their own economies, but have also become an example for everyone from academics, to silicon valley CEOs in their unique approach.