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Prague is famous for both its architecture and its beer



PRAGUE'S BEER TAVERNS — A CZECH TRADITION

By Sharon Hudgins
Photos by the author

Many people consider Czech beer to be the best in the world. The Czechs think so, too: they're the biggest consumers of beer on the planet, drinking an average of 161 liters (42.5 gallons) per person annually (about 30% more than their beer-loving neighbors next door in Germany).

The Czechs prefer to drink their beer on tap, in local taverns, fresh from the barrel, not from bottles or cans. "Cans are for sauerkraut," they say. Another Czech saying emphasizes the importance of the taverns: "The brewmaster brews the beer, the innkeeper makes it great."

BEER TAVERNS IN PRAGUE

Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, has long been known for its beer taverns, some of which date from the Middle Ages. They've always been the haunts of workers and students, as well as those writers, artists and revolutionaries who preferred the classless camaraderie of the humble taverns to the social and intellectual pretensions of the city's more elegant coffeehouses.

Before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, some of the beer taverns in Communist-era Prague were known as places where tourists (and spies) from the West could rendezvous with people from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who were allowed to travel to Czechoslovakia but could not go to Western Europe or the United States. Of course those same taverns also attracted agents of Czechoslovakia's secret police, who spied on the

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Sign for the St. Norbert brewery in the Strahov district of Prague



Entrance to the St. Norbert brewery



Interior of the St. Norbert brewery, with a display of the different beers on tap.

"suspects" from East and West meeting over mugs of beer in the smoke-filled rooms. Back then, some of Prague's public taverns seemed like settings for a John le Carré novel.

After 1989, in the new capitalistic Czech Republic, some of those beer taverns cleaned up their grungy interiors but kept their traditional ambience. Others went completely glitzy-modern. A few old, defunct brewery taverns were brought back to life, and new microbrew pubs opened, too.

Today Prague, a metropolis of 1.2 million people, has hundreds of beer taverns, from well-known hangouts in the central part of the city to little neighborhood pubs patronized only by locals. Prague's classic beer taverns are also good places to eat, offering traditional Czech dishes like grandmother used to make, at reasonable prices that won't break your budget.



Prague's oldest tavern, U Fleků, was founded in 1499

U FLEKŮ

Prague's oldest, best known, and most touristy tavern is U Fleků (At Flek's Place), which dates back to 1499. Today, U Fleků's famous strong dark beer is still brewed on the premises, attracting hordes of beer-lovers from around the globe.

The building's rather plain exterior is distinguished only by the large gilded ironwork clock, the tavern's symbol, on the front. Inside you'll find several "Old World" rooms with dark wood paneling, vaulted ceilings, stained-glass windows, and beams painted with barley and hops motifs. Part of the building surrounds two open-air courtyards used as beer gardens in warm weather.

The food is decent and moderately priced. The multilingual menu includes roast duck with sauerkraut and dumplings, beef with sour cream sauce and bread dumplings, goulash with bacon dumplings, smoked pork with sauerkraut and potato dumplings.



Pork with sauerkraut and dumplings or sliced braised beef with bread dumplings and sour cream sauce are specialties at U Dvou Koček.

U Fleků seats a total of 1,200 people in its various dining areas, and it's often packed in peak periods. In tourist season, go there in mid-morning or mid-afternoon if you want to find a seat. The tavern also features live music, an "Old Prague cabaret" in the evenings, and a brewery museum for serious students of the suds.



Interior of the U Dvou Koček tavern

U DVOU KOČEK

Even in the Communist era, U Dvou Koček (At the Two Cats) was known for its good, traditional, beer-tavern food, served with mugs of fresh, foamy Pilsener Urquell beer, in a centuries-old building in central Prague. Although the cigarette-smoke-stained walls have now been repainted and the entire place spruced up, U Dvou Koček retains its character as a small Czech beer tavern where locals and tourists mingle over plates of goulash with two kinds of dumplings, smoked pork neck with spinach and potato dumplings, and rabbit with cream sauce, cranberries and bread dumplings. For a hearty appetizer, try the "Devilish Spicy Toast," then finish your meal with "Homemade Cinnamon Pancakes with Blueberry Cream and Blueberries."

U MEDVÍDKŮ

U Medvídků (At the Little Bears) is an old historic tavern, recently renovated, where beer has been served since 1466. Today's tavern retains the vaulted ceilings of the original structure in several rooms and features an open-air beer garden, too.

The wood-paneled restaurant has an extensive, multilingual menu of Central European dishes, including a game menu (in autumn) of venison, wild sheep, wild duck and pheasant accompanied by red cabbage, potatoes and dumplings. Many of the hot and cold appetizers are portioned large enough to make a light meal in themselves: try the "Medvědí tlapy," the tavern's own version of "devil's toast" with a piquant meat mixture on top; or four slices of fried rye bread with house-made beer-cheese spread. The "Čertovo kolo" ("devil's wheel"), is a delicious plate-size potato pancake topped with a spicy mixture of meat and vegetables.

The tavern serves Budvar (original Budweiser) beer on tap, as well as semi-dark Oldgott and very strong X-Beer from the new microbrewery upstairs, the smallest brewery in Prague, established in 2005. There's also a cabaret section, a small museum, and a shop selling several kinds of beer and beer paraphernalia.

U RUDOLFINA



Sign at the entrance to the U Dvou Koček (At the Two Cats) tavern.



Drawing Pilsner Urquell beer from the tap at U Dvou Koček.



Czechs enjoying their beer at U Rudolfina.

Beyond the nondescript exterior, just inside the front door you'll find a small, simple, wood-paneled room with a small bar. Downstairs is a larger area, just as plain in decor, and as smoky and noisy as the little room upstairs. Way in the back is a separate dining room set aside for non-smokers.

In addition to the excellent beer, U Rudolfina serves some of the best beer-tavern food in town. Start with a basket of "topinky," slices of dark rye bread fried on both sides, sprinkled with salt, and accompanied by whole cloves of garlic for you to rub on the bread, as much or as little as you like; or a plate of "beer cheese," a mound of soft cheese with mustard and chopped onions on the side, which you mash together with your fork and spread on fresh bread. The main dishes emphasize meat—beef, pork, sausages, chicken—and are very well prepared, large portioned and reasonably priced.

Reservations are recommended because this is such a popular place—and well worth visiting for an authentic, no frills, Prague beer tavern experience.

RECOMMENDED PRAGUE BEER TAVERNS

U Fleků, Křemencová 11, Prague 1, www.ufleku.cz. Open daily 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.

U Dvou Koček, Uhelný trh, 10, Prague 1, www.udvoukocek.cz. Open daily 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

U Medvídků, Na Perštýně 7, Prague 1, www.umedvidku.cz. Open 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.

U Rudolfina, Křížovnická 10, Prague 1. Open 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

For current reviews and ratings of more than 60 Prague beer taverns, see www.praguepubs.co.uk.



Typical sign for a Prague beer tavern and restaurant. Many signs are in English to attract foreign customers.



About the writer

Sharon Hudgins is an award-winning writer with three books and more than 600 articles published worldwide. Her food and travel writing has appeared in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Saveur*, *Gastronomica*, *German Life*, *Russian Life*, *The World & I*, *Chile Pepper*, *Fiery Foods & Barbecue*, major newspapers in the United States, and periodicals in Germany, Russia and the Czech Republic. For several years she was the food columnist for *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper in Europe, and since 1997 has written a food column for *German Life* magazine in the United States. A former editor of *Chile Pepper* magazine, she has also worked as a cookbook editor, photographer, filmmaker and university professor.

Sharon Hudgins has lived in several countries in Europe and Asia and traveled in more than 45 countries around the world. Her European experience includes living in Germany for 15 years, as well as in several European capitals and in small towns from northern Scotland to southern Spain to the Greek island of Crete. She also works as a tour expert for National Geographic Expeditions. She is the author of an award-winning cookbook about the regional cuisines of Spain, and her latest book is *The Other Side of Russia: A Slice of Life in Siberia and the Russian Far East* (Texas A & M University Press, 2003, 2004), winner of two national awards for travel and food writing.

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