



A Principled Beijing Beer Importer

by Lulu Johnson

Walking into Morel's Belgian Restaurant in Beijing one instantly feels at home. The soft yellow light, red-checkered curtains and unique wall hangings inspire a feeling of home. Standing inside to greet this writer was Renaat Morel, the owner and director of Morel's Restaurant.

Renaat Morel is not your typical restaurateur. A Belgian with deep cultural attachment to the beer, food and atmosphere of his homeland, he has spent two decades in China's restaurant scene. Morel's is a name any true beer connoisseur in Beijing would recognize, as the sole importer of many of the finer and more rare Belgian delicacies. With nearly forty beers on the menu, Morel's offers an entire range of Belgian specialties, as well as an in-house wine cellar, liquor and an impressive cappuccino machine.

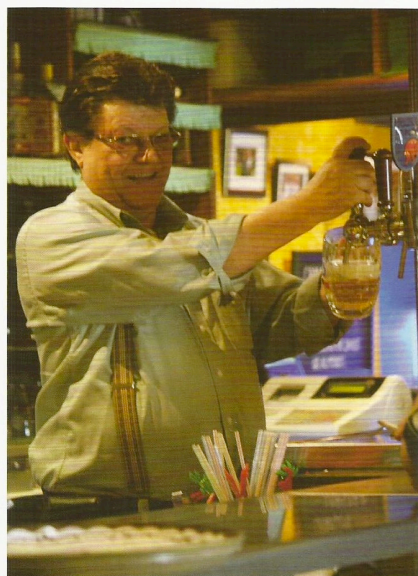
Morel is perhaps a historian at heart, delving deep into each brew on his menu until he has uncovered the history of the brewery and its affiliations. He samples the beer, with each sip summing up the essence of those who brew it. Flipping through the impressive beer list,

Morel pauses here and there to explain the history of one brewery, or the exquisite flavoring of another. There is no beer on the menu Morel hasn't vetted personally.

"I'm an anti-multinationalist," says Morel. He leans back in a comfortable wooden chair and recounts the history of several above average beers that declined when multinational corporations took over ownership. Morel appreciates the traditional process and methods employed by early brewers, and shuns those who forsake their roots for cash. Hence, he does not like to support the multinational beer companies that he feels are buying up reputable breweries and then remaking them into a mass-produced shadow of the former brew.

Morel leans forward on the table, crosses his arms and takes on a grave expression "Before WWI every village had its own brewery," Morel laments, "but the Germans came in and they took the cooper. Many breweries had to close at that time." Again, in WWII, the Germans took cooper to smelt bullets for the war effort, further depleting the Belgian beer supply. "Duvel had to





Renaat Morel is not your typical restaurateur. A Belgian with deep cultural attachment to the beer, food and atmosphere of his homeland, he has spent two decades in China's restaurant scene.

start again, they had to borrow money when they were bankrupt," Morel explains of post WWII Belgium. Many breweries never resurfaced after the World Wars, and the number shrank from some 2,100 breweries to the roughly 120 (brewing 850 kinds of beers) that exist today.

Spoken like a man who really knows and loves his beer, Morel believes that some have become "too commercial." Those well-brewed, unique beer of the past have been replaced by a look and taste that is rather more clean and corporate.

Like many beer enthusiasts, Morel appreciates a distinct type of beer. "The Morel's white beer on the menu is the same as the recipe for Hoegaarden before it was owned by Stella," Morel exclaims, adding that the father of white beer, Pierre Celis, recently passed away. Morel is a man whose heart is closely connected to the tradition of brewing, so much so that he abandoned Hoegaarden when it was acquired by a corporation. "It is always like this, more and more small breweries go to big companies," Morel sighs with a shrug.

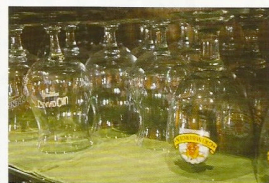


Looking around the restaurant Morel points out various beer paraphernalia on the walls. Belgian beer labels from yesteryear and today are framed and hung amid relics of Belgian history. Every item hanging on the wall has a story, and Morel is an avid weaver of stories, pausing at various objects to explain their relevance. This beer cartoon is from a Belgian town Olen with a unique three-handed cup. That story is 400 years old. Over there is a bottled beer that is nearly impossible to acquire...

"Did you know that in Belgium beer was a medicine?" Morel asks. The history of medicinal beers flows from his lips like the rehearsed dialogue of an excited professor. The Flemish part of Belgium is very flat, says Morel, and water drains slowly so sickness lingers and catches easily. The monks would bring the sick their beer and soon, they would get better. Beer is cooked, and thus cleaner than water and contains nutrients and a relatively low alcohol level. During the plague, those who drank beer instead of water were more likely to survive as the water was contaminated.

"When I was a boy I didn't like milk. The doctor told my mother, who was very worried, to give me beer to help make me strong," Morel says of his youth in Belgium. The alcohol content was less than 0.5% and the beer intended for the elderly, sick or young children to help them grow strong. Today, Morel has several medicinal beers on the menu.

Although Morel's has been in Beijing twelve years, the restaurant continues to grow. "We are adding 40+ new beers soon to the menu" Morel exclaims. Never one to believe a thing before seeing it, Morel will travel to Belgium to meet the brew masters, see the breweries and make his importing decisions. "There are roughly 800 beers in Belgium" but Morel will vet the lot of them for the finest brews and import them to his restaurants in Beijing.



Morel's is primarily a restaurant, though many Belgians can be seen throughout the day enjoying a fine imported brew. Morel, who got his start as a chef in the south of France, builds the recipes, plans the menu and is frequently around the restaurant managing day to day affairs. With a lifetime in the restaurant business in the kitchen, as a catering consultant, and finally as a restaurateur, Morel knows the industry as well as he knows his beers.



Gongti Beilu (opposite Workers' Gymnasium North Gate, northwest corner of the intersection with Chunxiu Lu), Dongcheng District
东城区莫劳龙玺西餐
工体北路春秀路西北角工人体育馆北门对面