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Reinhard Fütterer pulling a Zoigl at his Schafferhof Zoiglstube in Neuhaus.

# ZOIGLBIER

Brewing Up a Living Tradition in Bavaria's Oberpfalz

By Franz D. Hofer

If you're a fan of German beer, chances are you've heard of *Zoiglbier*, even if you're not quite sure what this unique tradition of Bavaria's Oberpfalz region is all about.

On the surface, describing Zoigl is easy enough: a thirst-quenching, unfiltered lager brewed according to Germany's *Reinheitsgebot* (purity law). But Zoigl is less a kind of beer than a commitment to an age-old brewing tradition that has long since vanished across most of Bavaria. It starts with the communal brewhouse, a holdover from medieval times, and extends to the convivial living room atmosphere of the *Zoiglstube* (tavern). →



Zoigl brewers fire their kettles with wood at the crack of dawn, cool their wort in coolships exposed to the night air, and then haul the wort to the cellars under their Zoiglstube for fermentation, often in open vessels. After several weeks of lagering, they serve their beer unfiltered and straight from the cellar. The result: a Kellerbier par excellence.

The Zoiglstube is central to Zoigl culture. Authentic Zoigl is never bottled, and brewers serve their Zoigl for only a few days each month. You'll know the beer's flowing when you come across the Zoiglstern hanging above a tavern door, the six-pointed star that symbolizes all that Zoigl entails.

### RATED "AUTHENTIC"

Not every brewer enjoys the good fortune of living in a town with historic brewing rights and a still-operational communal bre-

whouse. Spend any time in the Oberpfalz—often called Upper Palatinate in English—and you'll encounter beers sold on tap or in bottles as Zoigl but which do not carry the *Echter Zoigl vom Kommunbrauer* seal of authenticity. Just because a particular Zoigl beer or establishment doesn't bear the seal of authenticity, however, doesn't mean you shouldn't seek out them out.

But there's something special about drinking an authentic Zoigl in one of the five Oberpfalz towns with historic brewing rights. An authentic Zoigl will taste a little different each time. This has everything to do with the nature of Zoigl brewing, in particular the seasonal effects of cooling wort in a coolship, along with the vagaries of open fermentation. It's a bit like homebrewing. It's also where the *Reinheitsgebot* and the ethos of craft beer meet. The Zoigl tradition rejects

both the standardization represented by industrial-scale breweries and the homogenization of taste represented by international beers that taste the same everywhere.

### ZOIGL THEN AND NOW

Zoigl traces its roots to the Middle Ages. In regions like Franconia and the Oberpfalz, brewing privileges were extended to all householders when their locale was raised to the status of a market town. As time passed and towns grew, only householders possessing brewing rights attached to their property and registered in the town cadastre could use the communal brewhouse after paying *Kesselgeld* (kettle money), a fee collected for the maintenance of the communal brewhouse. This ancient arrangement continues to this day.

The history of communal brewing has had a profound influence on when and where we drink Zoigl. Since there was only one brewhouse in town, citizens with brewing rights devised a schedule for brew days in accordance with the brewer's house number or via lottery. Intermittent brewing naturally meant that brewers could only serve their beer intermittently.

Families with brewing and serving rights converted their homes into small taverns whenever their beer was ready, setting up tables and chairs for thirsty locals in the living room or in the kitchen. To let the townsfolk know that beer was flowing, brewers hung a sign from the façades of their houses. The brewer's star eventually replaced other signs like brooms or spruce boughs to become the Oberpfalz's now-famous *Bierzeiger* (beer sign), or Zoigl. *Zeiger* comes from the verb *zeigen*, which means "to show or indicate." In its diminutive form, *Zeiger* becomes *Zeigel*, which, in the idiom of the Oberpfalz, becomes *Zoigl*.

Zoigl has enjoyed a renaissance of late, one connected with a broader cultural trend that valorizes artisanal food traditions and the taste of place. There's a certain historical irony here: the cultural trappings of a beer from a region that was too poor to modernize its industry during the 19th century is now considered intangible cultural heritage by the German UNESCO commission. Brewing methods and technologies once thought outmoded have gained a new cachet as a living tradition worth preserving. Zoigl today is no mere dusty display in a museum of ethnography, but rather an integral part of everyday life and local identity.

Lautering with a grant during brew day at the communal brewhouse in Windischeschenbach.



## THE ZOIGLSTUBE

The centuries of tradition embodied in the tavern culture of the Oberpfalz's five Zoigl towns are just as important as the beer itself. Historically, Zoigl was served in the brewer's kitchen or living room. Today the Zoiglstube takes the place of the literal kitchen. The best ones make you feel like you're not quite in a conventional pub or restaurant. Solitary drinkers are rare as Yeti sightings. And you absolutely will make new friends.

Unlike Munich or Bamberg, you can't just show up in the Oberpfalz and expect to visit all the Zoiglstuben in a given town over the course of a weekend. Consult the Zoigl calendar ([zoiglbier.de/zoigltermine](http://zoiglbier.de/zoigltermine)), which lists openings for the entire year, and cross your fingers that the stars align so you can visit the ones you want. If that sounds like a mild hassle, take heart. Back in the day, you'd have to wander the streets and lanes of these towns with an eagle eye out for the Zoigl star indicating that you'd struck Zoigl gold.

### Three Zoiglstuben

**Kramer-Wolf, Falkenberg.** Kramer-Wolf's Zoiglstube radiates rustic charm, its yellow walls bedecked with musical instruments that entertained peasants well into the night after a hard day's work. Kramer-Wolf's Zoigl is a hazy amber-orange brew combining spicy noble hops with toasty malt accented by honey and a hint of caramel. Though hearty, its light effervescence and peppery finish ensure that you'll order more than one.

Food here is hearty as well. The Schlachtschüssel, an ample dish of liverwurst, blood sausage, and juicy pork belly, is emblematic of the region. Many Zoigl brewers were (and are) also butchers, and so is Kramer-Wolf's proprietor, Herr Fischer—you can rest assured that the meat in your Schlachtschüssel has been freshly butchered. Accompanied by a veritable mountain of sauerkraut, this is one of the least Instagram-worthy meals you'll encounter, but is it ever divine.

### Zum Posterer, Windischeschenbach.

Once a postal station, this Zoiglstube next to the St. Emmeram vicarage is now a cozy two-floored tavern with rustic furnishings and well-worn wooden floors. Joseph Zehrer, the person who opened the postal station, had been the tower watchman for the parish of St. Emmeram. One day he hit upon the idea of trading his fire horn for a postal horn and opened up the postal station in 1865 at his erstwhile watch station.

Zum Posterer's Zoigl is hazy deep amber with a firm bitterness balanced by a toasty maltiness—an excellent lubricant for impromptu drinking sessions with lively groups of hikers from a few towns north.

**Schafferhof, Neuhaus.** One Zoiglstube stands out as a kind of first among equals. This has as much to do with the stellar Zoigl as with the gregarious personality of its owner, Reinhard Fütterer, a chimney sweep with a penchant for collecting antique furniture. While out on a walk one sunny, snow-dusted January day, Reinhard and his wife Gabi had the idea to buy the Schafferhof. It was a crazy idea, Fütterer recalls.

The cluster of buildings that make up the Schafferhof was once a farm, but the stables hadn't echoed with the sound of cows or pigs since the 1960s. By the time



When you see the six-pointed star (Zoigl), you know you've struck Zoigl gold. Pictured here: Kramer-Wolf in Falkenberg



# Home Is Where Your Zoigl Is

## Zoiglbier-style lager

Most Zoigls aren't this aromatic, so you could safely skip the knockout hop addition if you'd like more prominent malt notes.

<b>Batch volume:</b>	5 US gal. (18.9 L)
<b>Original gravity:</b>	1.048 (12°P)
<b>Final gravity:</b>	1.011 (2.8°P)
<b>Efficiency:</b>	75%
<b>Bitterness:</b>	28 IBU
<b>Color:</b>	9 SRM (amber-orange)
<b>Alcohol:</b>	4.9% by volume

## MALTS

7 lb.	(3.18 kg) German Pilsner malt, 1.6°L
3 lb.	(1.36 kg) dark Munich malt, 20°L

## HOPS

1.0 oz.	(28g) Hallertauer Mittelfrüh, 4.8% a.a. @ 60 min
0.75 oz.	(21g) Hallertauer Mittelfrüh, 4.8% a.a. @ 20 min
0.25 oz.	(7g) Hallertauer Mittelfrüh, 4.8% a.a. @ 0 min

## BREWING NOTES

A decoction mash is classic, but a step infusion mash will also get you where you want to go. Start with a 10-minute protein rest at 137°F (58°C). Bump up the temperature, either by adding heat or boiling water, for a 40-minute beta amylase/maltose rest at 147°F (64°C). Raise the temperature for a 20-minute alpha amylase/dextrin rest at 162°F (72°C). Check for starch conversion before mashing out for 10 minutes at 168–170°F (76–77°C).

Whichever mash technique you choose, sparge to collect 6.75 gallons of wort. Boil for 90 minutes, cool, pitch your yeast, and aerate well. Ferment at 48°F (9°C) until primary fermentation finished, then lager for 4 weeks around 32°F (0°C). Carbonate to 2.2–2.3 vol. (4.4–4.6 g/L) CO<sub>2</sub> and serve unfiltered.

Whatever you do, don't forget to hang a Zoigl above your door when the beer's ready.

## ADDITIONAL ITEMS

yeast nutrient @ 10 min

## YEAST

White Labs WLP835 German X Lager Yeast (make a large starter and aerate well after pitching)

## WATER

Soften your water with your usual procedure or treat 10 gal. (37.9 L) reverse osmosis water with ½ tsp lactic acid, 1.1 g gypsum (CaSO<sub>4</sub>), 1.1 g Epsom salt (MgSO<sub>4</sub>), and 6.2 g calcium chloride (CaCl<sub>2</sub>).



Pressack, one of many kinds of head cheese available in the region's Zoiglstuben. At Schoilmichl in Neuhaus, the bar counter is more like a kitchen counter.

the Fütterer bought the Schafferhof in 1999, one of the roofs had collapsed and ground moisture had taken its toll. The site would need a bit of TLC. Fütterer set to work transforming the dilapidated buildings into the envy of Neuhaus, filling his Zoiglstube with the treasure trove of rustic furnishings he had amassed from shuttered *Wirtshäuser* (pubs) in the region.

"I had intended to open a Zoiglstube in my retirement," Fütterer recounts with a hearty laugh, "but I ended up getting started a few decades early."

Though he came to brewing later in life, Fütterer is meticulous about his approach to beer. There's an ancient Greek philosophical fragment that goes like this: "A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one important thing." Thinkers who resemble foxes draw upon a wide variety of experiences to make sense of the world. Those who resemble hedgehogs view the world through the lens of a single idea. Fütterer is Zoigl's equivalent of the hedgehog. He's always tinkering, trying to

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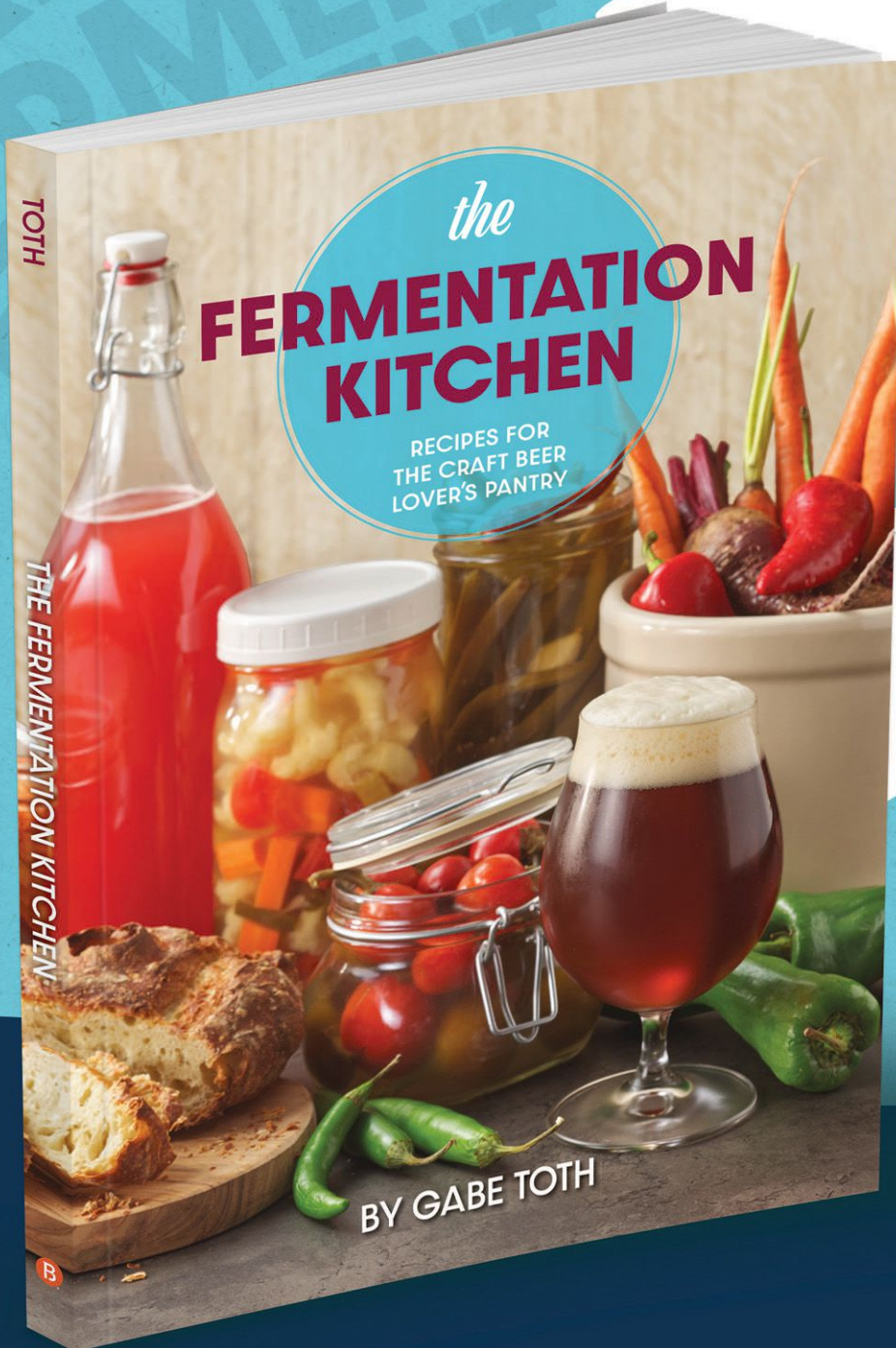
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capture the essence of a particular kind of hop aroma “floating just above the beer without overpowering it.”

“I’m still not totally satisfied with it,” Fütterer admits. But he’s game for trying anything that’ll get him where he wants to be. We talked about dry hopping, which Fütterer found “promising.” We talked about adding hops in the coolship—“I didn’t notice much of a difference.” And we even talked about North American hops, but he finds the assertiveness of these hops to be too much

of a departure from traditional Zoigl. “I have to tread carefully. Even if I make an excellent beer with one of these techniques, the regulars will get up in arms if the beer changes even slightly. So I need to do things gradually.”

So far, so good. Fütterer’s stellar amber-gold Zoigl is full-bodied and rich, with a clean malt background that leans in the direction of light toast and fresh country bread. But it’s the hops that really shine: subtle but distinctive, with notes of pepper and baking spice.

## SENSORY ELEMENTS OF A HALBE OF ZOIGL

The Zoigl ballpark is somewhere between helles and Märzen, though typically not as richly malty as the latter, and not as high in alcohol. Many hew in the direction of quaffable, malty, hop-inflected beers, often firmly bittered.

Rich country bread and a light toastiness is a hallmark of most Zoigls, with a pleasant honeyed character predominating in the lighter versions. The interplay of malt and hops lends these beers a freshness reminiscent of Alpine meadows and freshly mown hay. Hops are subtle but present, showcasing the floral, pepper, and spice of German varieties. Many exhibit that beguiling “stone fruit and mineral” note associated with low levels of sulfur. Carbonation is almost always on the low end, creamy with the occasional peppery effervescence.

Diacetyl is not uncommon, but it isn’t as widespread as folks with only a passing acquaintance with the Oberpfalz would have you believe. Zoigl once had a reputation for poor quality, especially right after the Second World War. Even today, you’re not going to get anywhere near industrial consistency when you’re stoking your mash

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tuns and kettles with a wood fire, to say nothing of coolships and open fermentation. In almost all cases where diacetyl is present, it exhibits a light “country butter” or butterscotch note that adds character. Don’t fear the diacetyl!

## BREWING ZOIGLBIER

To brew an authentic Zoiglbier, all you need is a wood-fired communal brew-house, a coolship, and a cellar beneath your own Zoiglstube, preferably where you can open-ferment your beer. Even if you don’t happen to have these three things, you can still brew a reasonable approximation. The ingredients are simple enough: Pilsner malt, Munich malt, and German hops.

Reinhard Fütterer, whose beer is on the lighter side, uses a 9-to-1 ratio of Pils to Munich. Other brewers use more Munich to achieve that toasty note occasionally accompanied by caramel. You could even sprinkle in a handful of CaraMunich or Carahell.

Fütterer uses Perle or Hallertau Tradition for bittering. Spalt and Hersbrucker are common flavor and aroma hops in the region. Fütterer does his last addition at knockout, which isn’t common, but it gives his beers a nice liveliness and a fine hop aroma.

Zoigl brewers get their yeast from conventional breweries in the region. In practice, you can use any lager yeast that attenuates in the 70 to 77 percent range. Go with your favourite Bavarian lager yeast, Oktoberfest yeast, or even Bohemian lager yeast.

A decoction mash is *de rigueur* for Zoiglbier. Fütterer performs a double decoction, as do many other brewers. Conduct your decoction to balance body with fermentability. If you don’t want to decoct, a step mash works just fine. A modified Hochkurz mash (higher temperatures, shorter time period) with a short 10-minute protein rest will get you sufficient maltiness and good foam retention to boot. Aim for a 40-minute beta amylase rest in the 142–147°F (61–64°C) range, followed by a 20-minute alpha amylase rest in the 158–162°F (70–72°C) range.

Boil times are, in general, longer than your typical 90-minute run, with some exceeding two hours to develop melanoidin. When it comes to coolships, Zoigl brewers are at the mercy of a kind of controlled fate. Cooling the wort on a cold winter night results in the cleanest beers. During summer, brewers do what they can to schedule brew days when the weather is cooler, something that climate change is making increasingly difficult.

Zoigl brewers ferment their beer in the lager sweet spot of 46–48°F (8–9°C). Some, but not all, use open fermenters during primary, which lasts from 10 to 18 days. Lagering times range from 4 to 12 weeks. The shorter duration is more common, but there’s no fixed rule. Fütterer tries to push his beers to 8 weeks. Spunding is ideal, but if you don’t have the wherewithal to do this, bottle conditioning also helps produce a softer, rounder carbonation than forced carbonation. Serve unfiltered and unpasteurized.

The author would like to thank Mac Butcher, Hans Franz, Reinhard Fütterer, Ferdinand Schraml, and David Thompson for their generosity in helping prepare this article.

*Franz D. Hofer experienced a beer conversion during his first study year abroad in Germany, where he learned that there was more to life than Labatt’s. From that moment he began honing his appreciation of beer, stoking his passion all the more after becoming a homebrewer in grad school. Franz is a cultural historian, beer judge, and author of the Tempest in a Tankard blog (tempestatankard.com). When not brewing, teaching, or writing, Franz enjoys hiking and cycling—preferably when there’s beer involved along the way.*

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