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Prost in PH: It's Oktoberfest season in the most unlikely of places

Jeffrey Hernaez, ABS-CBN News

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Various types of beer are lined up in a German supermarket. Jeffrey Hernaez, ABS-CBN News

BERLIN -- In Munich, it's lederhosen and parades. In Manila, it's t-shirts and rock concerts.

Whatever the form of entertainment, however, what ties the two Oktoberfest events together is the love for beer.

While traditionally, September signals the start of the beer festival, the Philippines celebrates its affinity for brewskies in the month of October. In fact, a big open-air event happened last Wednesday, with revelers availing of buy-one-take-one promos of the country's best-known beer products as the country's hottest bands rock it out on concert stages.

Within the confines of upscale hotels, there are Oktoberfest promos as well, where local and imported beers are usually served with a variety of sausages.

Germany is undoubtedly a beer-drinking country, something I observed first-hand through my first strolls out on the streets. I noticed Germans sitting on sidewalk bars indulging in their bracing brews even in the morning as accompaniment for their meals of pasta and bread. While many big breweries abound, churning out traditional favorites that have strong and bold flavors, I was told that lighter craft beers are becoming popular, with younger beer fans seeking out pales from microbreweries.

One thing I learned is how strict the beer-making process is followed according to the Reinheitsgebot, which permits only water, hops, and malt as ingredients.

The "beer-purity law" also stipulates that beers not exclusively using barley-malt such as wheat beer must be top-fermented. I believe, more than anything, it is an indication of how much pride this country takes in the quality of its product.



Various types of beer are lined up in a German supermarket. *Jeffrey Hernaez, ABS-CBN News*

Of course, Germans imbibe other things aside from beer. I found from attending dinner parties that they like their Sekt and Schnapps too. I was told that Schnapps is consumed not only because of its herbal flavors, but also because it is believed to aid in digestion.

I was also surprised to learn that after France and Italy, Germany is the third biggest producer of sparkling wine in the world, with 13 official wine regions.

Beer cocktails are also served to those inclined, and this is something novel for me, as it is not usually done in bars in the Philippines. Apparently, beer here can be mixed with Coke for something called a Diesel, and with Sprite for a Radler.

In the Philippines, beer-drinking is associated with celebrations. Many of the festivals around the archipelago are accompanied by feasts where beer is consumed. It is also served on special occasions, or simply during gatherings of friends after a long week at work. Rare is a commercial where it is shown to be a drink enjoyed at home alone. Most advertisements always have our beer drinkers in groups; the larger, the better.

Alcohol consumption is generally a communal act among the masses, with the Filipino tradition called "tagay" laying proof to this.

Tagay is an act of sharing a drink from one vessel, symbolizing kinship or brotherhood. A person in charge pours the beverage into a cup or glass, and it is passed around and refilled as needed. It is a ritual not solely confined to beer, with research showing that it is a common way of welcoming visitors to your hometown; by offering a guest a glass of whatever spirits are locally available, such as tuba or coconut wine in Quezon province, or rice wine from the North, you are showing your hospitality.

In contrast to Germans who drink their beer with meals (I attended a party where they served only bread and dips to go with the spirits), Filipinos prefer savory and fried dishes that are particularly popular for pairings during their drinking outings.

These include something as simple as spicy peanuts fried with garlic, deep-fried crispy pork knuckles or the sisig – a crunchy amalgamation of pork cheeks, pig's ears, and pork liver, seasoned with garlic, citrus, and chili peppers that originated from the province of Pampanga.

Traditionally, beer in the Philippines is produced by industry giants such as San Miguel Brewery and Asia Brewery, with San Miguel Beer being the older brand having been established back in 1890, and is popular both in the Philippines and in Hong Kong.



While both beer brands are still lording it over in the tills, the concept of craft beer is also gaining ground, with a few enterprising beer lovers coming out with their own homegrown brands of IPAs (India Pale Ale) and pale ales, some even infusing them with local flavors such as coffee, mangoes, or coconuts.

Whether in Germany or the Philippines, beer plays an important part of culture and society. It binds us together as friends, enjoying the flavorful pleasures that a cold mug or stein can provide.

To this, I say prost (cheers) and mabuhay!

This article was written as part of the Goethe-Institut's Close Up Journalist's exchange programme. More information can be found at www.goethe.de/nahaufnahme and at [#goethecloseup](https://twitter.com/goethecloseup).

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