

Rochefort 10; Age Before Beauty ?

Do all things improve with age? Well certain characteristics do tend to change with maturity, with various degrees of subtlety and acceptability; some for the better, and some arguably for the worse. And so on the occasion of my fairly mature 52nd birthday, I decided it was time to test out the ageing theory. Not on myself, I hasten to add but on my collection of ten bottles of Rochefort 10, a wonderful, flavoursome Trappist beer of a respectable 11.3% abv. I had accumulated my collection at the rate of two bottles per year, (one for drinking straight away, and one for saving,) going back to the end of the last century.

So on the torrentially rainy evening 22nd of November 2012, four of us met in the Prince of Wales brew pub, in Foxfield, Cumbria home to the Foxfield brewery. Me and my wife Diane joined our hosts Stuart and Lynda Johnson, who kindly provided two more recent samples of the beer, to investigate what effect the aging and maturing process had on twelve examples of differently aged bottles of Rochefort 10. Stuart and Lynda run the pub and brewery, and are important members of the Cumbrian CAMRA branches tasting panel, assessing and evaluating the huge range of beers from the thirty-odd (at the last count...) Cumbrian breweries, with the view of putting the best of them forward to ultimately be entered in to the annual CAMRA Champion Beer Of Britain competition. In fact our local Coniston brewery has produced the supreme champion beer on two occasions, with Bluebird in 1998, and No. 9 Barley Wine in 2012, with other local breweries, such as Cumbrian Legendary and Hawkshead, achieving national recognition, too. Lynda also provides tutored tastings of beers for any keen beer fans who wish to develop their appreciation and understanding of beer flavours and characteristics, both good and bad. Basically Stuart and Lynda know what they are talking about when it comes to beer, so it was good to have them involved in such a rare event as tasting and appreciating twelve years of Rochefort 10.

Me and Diane are both active members of the Furness branch of CAMRA (at the time of our tasting, Diane was Branch Treasurer). All four of us are big fans of Rochefort 10, regarding it as being one of the world's top beers.

Rochefort 10 itself, as mentioned earlier, is an 11.3% abv. beer, brewed by Trappist monks, (and some secular workers) at Abbaye Notre-Dame de Saint-Remy, in the town of Rochefort, in the Ardennes, Belgium. There are six Trappist monastery breweries in Belgium, and one in the Netherlands, and Saint-Remy dates from at least 1230, first brewing in 1595, with one or two breaks for wars etc., up to the present day. Apparently the beer is brewed utilising Styrian Goldings and German Hallertau hops. Two separate yeast strains are used; one in the initial fermentation process, and the other is added to the bottle, along with white crystal sugar, to promote the bottle conditioning process. Two additional beers are produced at the monastery; Rochefort 8 (9.2% abv.) and Rochefort 6 (7.5% abv.) the numbers in the names being based on an old Belgian system of degrees of gravity, and which it is said, coincides with the number of days each beer type is left to condition in the bottle before being released to the public.

Researching on the internet, Rochefort 10 appears to be (almost) universally praised to the hilt as a superb example of a beer of exceptional quality and taste. Most reviews agree that the beer is dark ruby-brown in colour, with a tan-brown head. It is in the descriptions of the aromas and tastes detected in the beer where things get a bit more exotic. Rich aromas of sweet malt, dark fruit such as figs and plums, peppery spice, bitter chocolate, brandy cream, and even coconut are mentioned, but hop aromas are conspicuous by their absence. Some of the aromas are reflected in the overall taste, with sweet caramel malt, ripe bananas and fruity esters being mentioned, with pepper, chocolate, fudge, nutmeg and other spices being evident, with only modest but balanced hops adding to an obvious strong alcohol hit. I must admit I have probably detected all of these traits in Rochefort 10 at one time or another, and I'm certain probably all of the tasting notes I found were based on tasting relatively young versions of the beer. One

website recommended keeping the beer for a couple of months to mature, so it was going to be very interesting for us to see the effect of a number of years of ageing on such a mighty, complex brew.

Anyone who has seen the classic 'Trappistes Rochefort' lettering on the cream coloured label on the bottle, with the iconic white '10' on a blue circular background, will have noticed a date printed on the label. Nowadays though, the date appears on the rear label, which in itself is a recent addition, and seems to be a more 'computer generated' font than the earlier printed dates, which had more of a dot-matrix appearance, with even earlier versions having a hand stamped look about them. A classic label indeed, not so much for the label's design; more as to what is promised to be delivered... But I digress; it's not so much about the bottle.... The date on the label itself is apparently five years ahead of the bottling date, and so seems to be some kind of 'use-by' guide. So for example, '25 08 09' on a bottle means that the beer was bottled on 25th August 2004, and as for a 'use-by' date, it certainly doesn't mean that the beer turns to vinegar at the stroke of midnight on the label date, as we shall see! (Note: there are additional notes on the evolution in the design of the label at the end of this article.)

As mentioned earlier, I provided ten of the older bottles, with Stuart and Linda supplying the two most recent ones in order to compare the freshest examples with the aged beers. My bottles had each been purchased in the year of their production, (or within a couple of months), usually in batches of two or three, so that at least I had something to drink at the time! The bottles were stored in a cupboard at a cooler than average temperature, and in darkness. Obviously I cannot comment on the storage conditions in the shop or warehouse pre-purchase. I would like to think that these beers had been treated with the respect they deserve!

As we settled down in the early evening at the Prince of Wales for the tasting, the last of the customers left. Such was the intensity of the rain outside that it seemed nobody wanted to venture out to the pub that night, and very unusually for such a popular pub, the four of us were left undisturbed all evening!

The bottles were opened, and the beers were carefully decanted into large glasses, leaving an inch or so of beer and yeast sediment in each bottle. They were left for 10 minutes, and the condition of the head was noted at this time. Lynda commented that the appearance of the head does not necessarily equate to the condition of the beer. We had a tasting glass each for every different beer, decanting each in turn from the glass into which the beer had been originally poured. After the initial tasting of the clear beer, the yeast sediment was mixed with the remaining beer from the initial pour, in the bottle, and was added to our individual decanted beer so we could investigate what effect the yeast had on the beers' flavours. Diane took tasting notes of our verbal interpretations based on the 'classic' Rochefort 10 flavours as described in the paragraphs above, along with any other significant characteristics we might have detected. The beers were sampled ten minutes after pouring, as mentioned above. With water and dry crackers provided as palate cleansers, we started the tasting with the oldest of the twelve:

The beers are identified by the date on their label.

1. 15/09/2004

Very thin head which disappeared quickly. Very little 'fizz'. Very pancaked sediment. Oily looking. Aroma of port wine and sherry. Liveliness in the mouth was short-lived. Some degree of dryness. 'A good sherry, but a bit over the hill for a beer'. The yeast added a lot, bringing chocolate flavours and an enhanced general rich dark fruitiness.

2. 07/09/2005

The head had disappeared. Little 'fizz'. Less 'winey' than the previous one, but more oily in appearance. Swirling released a richer, fruitier aroma. Sweeter tasting than the last one, and not as dry in mouth. More mouthfeel generally with a tiny bit of prickly liveliness. Generally not as satisfying as the 2004. Yeast improved the beer for the better in terms of flavour, but not by much.

3. 23/05/2006

Little to no head remained. Little 'fizz' again. First taste, one of us had 'died and gone to heaven'. Delicious 'ripples of flavour'. Clean sweetness. Again not as bitter or as drying in the mouth. Generally smoother in mouthfeel, with enhanced, balanced flavours. The yeast added bitterness, and the flavour of cloves, which wasn't evident in the initial poured beer. The degree of bitterness detracted from the smooth fruit flavours, and it was agreed that this version of the beer was better without the yeast.

4. 04/09/2007

A more lively beer, producing a head in the bottle on opening. In the glass the head faded a little to leave a hole in the middle. The sediment was quite stable. The beer was noted as being thinner in the mouth, and tasted a little woody, with quite a bit of astringency, and without the luscious fruity sweetness of the previous one. There was noticeably more alcohol in the aroma and taste than before, and the yeast only added bitterness. This was the least favourite so far.

5. 26/08/2008

Very lively in the bottle. The head developed a very small hole as it faded. The initial aromas were reminiscent of the 2004 version, with similar winey and sherry aspects. Cloves were back in the mix, but pleasantly balanced. There was a rather lively mouthfeel. Very enjoyable at the first taste, and in the finish, but for some reason the middle wasn't so inspiring. The yeast didn't really improve or detract. Generally a not bad version.

6. 25/08/2009

Some fizz on opening, but not a lot. The head remained in the glass on this one. Lots of good, rich aromas, toffee being especially prominent. Not as thick and heavy in the mouth as some of the previous ones, yet the beer had quite a dense oily appearance when swirled in the glass. Good profile generally in terms of aroma and taste. The yeast really accentuated the typical Rochefort 10 flavours and aromas. Good reviews all round.

7. 18/05/2010

Tiny head appeared in the bottle. A ½ cm. Head remained on the poured beer. Lumpy sediment. More complex aromas than the previous beers. The initial taste brought forth general noises of appreciation from the group. The flavours changed right over the tongue, and even noticeably over the roof of the mouth. Long lasting flavour, including treacle, molasses, with traces of dark chocolate orange, and even a hint of sweet coconut was detected. Peppery spice was noted, with strong alcohol notes. The yeast enhanced things slightly, but it was agreed this beer was just as good without it being added.

8. 18/01/2011

There was some liveliness on opening, but not much. The sediment was lumpy, and the head had disappeared. Also, the classic aromas had become more subtle. This beer tasted and smelled slightly different to the previous ones, with a gentle sugary sweetness detected, a light chocolate flavour, and honey was noted in the aroma and the taste. Alcohol fumes were more pronounced, too. Adding the yeast really benefitted the beer. 'That's done it... lovely'. The classic Rochefort 10 flavours were enhanced, with a lot more of the honey flavour we detected earlier.

9. 24/01/2012

Note: the last beer in the tasting which was past it's 'sell-by' date.

Fairly lively in the bottle. The head was starting to break up, but definitely lingered, even some clinging on the glass. Sweet, fresh yeast aromas were evident on the poured beer, with a zingy freshness to the beer itself. The flavours were generally lacking the multi-layered complexity of previous samplings, and it reminded us of the examples of this beer when served in a Belgian beer café. The yeast added much more complexity to the beer, bringing out darker fruit and chocolate flavours. While some of us preferred the richness the yeast added, Lynda preferred the cleaner flavours of the original pour.

10. 12/11/2014

Lively in the bottle, as we expected in a relatively younger beer. This version had the most sediment to date, probably because the yeast had had less time to clump and settle. The head remained, but was noticeably thinning. Yeasty, slightly earthy aromas were noticed. The flavours were more simplistic than previously. Not so much mellowness, with the high alcohol content producing tingling, burning sensation in the mouth. The taste of toffee was evident, with a definite almond flavour. The yeast helped merge the flavours and mellow any harshness, also giving a smoother mouthfeel.

11. 15/09/2016

Not a lot of bubbles on opening. The sediment was unstable, and moved easily during pouring. A head of more than ½ cm. remained. Initial aroma on opening was noticeably yeasty, but with the beer having been open for a couple of hours by now, the aromas had dissipated. Quite effervescent on the tongue initially, and quite sticky, too. Lacking in complexity, the taste was sweet and earthy, with the more intriguing Rochefort 10 flavours yet to fully develop. Adding the yeast helped spread the flavours, making them more accessible, adding bitterness and enhancing the peppery spiciness.

12. 15/07/2017

Maybe surprisingly not a lot of 'fizz' on opening. Fairly loose head which lingered to more than ½ cm. even after being poured for so long. Yeasty aromas again, but intermixed with fresher, more fruity smells than the older beers, and hints of burned sugar, too. Not quite as interesting in terms of complex flavours. Obvious characteristics of a young beer. Very pleasant enough to enjoy, without it being too challenging in terms of flavours. Adding the yeast doesn't improve anything; it just muddles the flavours. Not a beer from the future, but maybe a beer *for* the future.

Generally, we agreed that our personal favourites were:

2004 (Good, but not the best.)

2006 (Lovely 'zing' on the front of the tongue, and the way the flavours built up in the mouth.)

2009 ('Orgasmic', excellent aromas, too.) Lynda's favourite.

2010 ('Got the lot' for Rochefort 10. 'Satisfying and delicious...') Stuart, Stuart and Diane's favourite.

And so an interesting, unusual and hugely enjoyable evening drew to a close. Diane presented me with a birthday cake (for which I won't provide you with a taste profile...) and we all cleared up the collection of glasses and bottles. (Of course, I kept the bottles to soak off and keep their labels...)

We tried mixing the 2004 and 2017 as an experiment, but the flavours just seemed to be neutralised. The richness of one and the freshness of the other cancelled each other out.

In summary, we found a number of intriguing discoveries:

The beer quality overall seemed to peak in the beer that were seven to eight years old, but all of them were perfectly drinkable, indeed highly enjoyable, and had their own merits and characteristics.

A pattern developed that if a beer was a good one, then adding the yeast emphasised the interesting complexities of the beer. Generally the older beers, but not all of them, benefitted in this way. 'To yeast or not to yeast', was Lynda's quote. Or more accurately, 'to kraüsen or not to kraüsen.'

This write-up will hopefully provide hints as to what to look for in this wonderful beer. It's not a case of telling you what you should or should not get from a beer; what a person gets out of a beer in terms of tastes, flavours, aromas, or whatever is really pretty subjective. Just so long as you enjoy it, and remember that you enjoyed it. That's the main idea.

Huge thanks to Diane, Stuart and Lynda for giving their help, expertise and experience in undertaking this (not very) arduous project. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did!

Finally, I think this tasting session proves what a tremendous beer Rochefort 10 really is. A true classic amongst world beers, and one with proven longevity in terms of the beer and brewery, and the actual product itself. Truly a beer to be savoured enjoyed and respected, no matter what its age. So 'cheers' to the monks and brewers at Abbaye Saint-Remy!

Stuart Simpson

Addendum:

Some additional notes on the evolution of the Rochefort 10 beer bottle label.

These notes are in chronological order (...obviously), with an initial thorough description followed by notes of any subsequent changes to this original version.

2004: The label is rectangular, with a background colour of yellowish cream. All letters and numerals are in a very dark brown (almost black) type, of various fonts. Each label bears the iconic 'olde English' style title of 'Trappistes Rochefort', with the definitive white number 10 on a blue circle, with a thin white and then a thinner blue border. Also present on the label are:

A product identifying barcode reading '5 412858 000 104'.

'Authentic Trappist Product' in a hexagonal logo.

The words 'Biere' and 'Bier'.

A depiction of a typical basic Rochefort goblet, with '12° à 14°', the recommended serving temperature.

A deposit charge 'Consigne 3.5 BEF' in Belgian Francs.

A recycling emblem.

Ingredients in French, translates as 'water, malted barley, non malted cereals, hop, yeasts, sugars'.

The address of the Abbaye Saint-Remy.

A date in basic type print five years after bottling.

The 'official' beer volume of 'e 33cl.'

2005: Printed on the actual glass, beneath the stuck on label, is the 'Trappistes Rochefort' script, clear on a solid dark cream background, and in cream lettering, is the address of the monastery, and the wording 'biere de catégorie S, (whatever that means...), and the 'e 33cl' mark.

On the label, the words 'Best before' appear in both French and Dutch, and the ingredients have become bilingual, too.

'Consigne' is joined by the Dutch 'Statiegeld', and remains at 3.5 BEF.

2006: The label is the same, but the print on the glass has changed to include the wording 'brassée et soutirée à l'Abbaye de Rochefort par les Pères Trappistes'.

2007: Bottle print and the label are the same as 2006.

2008: The label is the same, but the bottle printing has gone.

2009: Same label style, but the consigne statiegeld has now modernised to '0,10 EUR'.

2010: Same label style, but the 'best before' date has moved from the right to the left side of the label, is printed in a 'dot-matrix' style, and includes a time, presumably the exact bottling time, e.g. '18 05 10, 08:51'.

2011: No change.

2012: No change.

2014: Lots of changes, but could they have at least partially occurred in 2013? The ingredients, best before, deposit etc. Are now in five languages, e.g. Biere, Bier, Birra, Beer, and Cerveza. The traditional goblet emblem has changed to the more elaborate depiction of the modern Rochefort chalice. There is the classic 'don't drink while pregnant' symbol of the silhouette of a pregnant woman drinking from a glass, struck out with a diagonal line. (Of course, it could be a fat bloke with a ponytail. Or a warning for women about the possible side effects of getting too sociable...)

2016: Dated 7/7, the pregnant woman is at the top of the label, and the chalice is at the bottom. Dated 15/9, the glass logo has moved to the top right of the label, with the woman at the bottom right, and the suggested serving temperature information has gone.

2017: Same as the 15/9 version from 2016.

2018: The previously cluttered label has been simplified with all the multilingual information on a separate label on the back of the bottle, and the languages used now includes German. The best before date is also on the rear, printed white on a brown background. The date and time is of the format '20.05.2018 10:10:55', presumably timed to the nearest second! The label also says 'Made in Belgium', and shows a Belgian flag.

Rochefort 10 Tasting Notes

Head: descriptions at 10mins post pour.

Only 3 with print on the bottle – 2005/6/7.

Yeast = yeast added back.

Older ones tended to benefit from the yeast.

Pattern developed that if the beer was a good one, then adding the yeast added so much more.

“Older ones (but not all) yeast emphasises the interesting complexities”.

Head doesn't necessarily equate to condition.

“Most impressed how consistent the beers appear to be”.

(Methodical brewing process, little changed over the years).

Dates: Expiry date therefore each bottled 5 years before.

1. 15/09/2004

Very little fizz.

Very pancaked sediment.

Very thin head which disappeared quickly.

Looks oily.

Smell: Port wine / Sherry / strong thicker wine.

On the mouth: a little fizz, then disappears.

Taste: Black toffee, spice, sherry, port,

“Good sherry, but over the hill for a beer.”

Yeast: added a lot, chocolate richer flavours.

2. 07/09/2005

Little fizz.

Head: Gone.

Not as winey, more oily.

Swirl released aroma.

Sweeter, not as drying.

Mouth: Tiny bit of prickly fizz – more mouth feel.

Taste – not as satisfying as 2004.

Yeast: Changed but not as much of an improvement.

3. 23/05/2006

Little bit of fizz.

Little/no head – head thin.

1st impression from Lynda – “Died and gone to heaven”

“Ripples of flavour”

Clean sweetness.

Not as bitter or as dry in the mouth.

Smooth.

Yeast: - yeast had a taste of bitterness & cloves which wasn't evident in the poured beer, when added back added a bitterness, beer was better without the yeast, detracted from the fruit.

4. 04/09/2007

Fizzy, producing a head in the bottle.

Stable sediment.

Head: Hole in the middle.

Woody, bit thinner.

Didn't have the luscious sweetness.

Quite a bit of astringency.

Least favourite up to now.

More alcoholic.

Yeast: adds bitterness.

5. 26/08/2008

Fairly lively in the bottle.

Head: very small hole.

Smells more like the 2004.

Taste: Finish and end are nice, middle not so clever.

Cloves. Lively mouth feel.

6. **25/08/2009**

Some fizz, not a lot.

Head: Covered.

High aroma – gentle toffee.

Mouthfeel: Not as thick (as previous).

Good profile.

Oilier.

“Like this one”

Yeast: Brings out everything.

7. **18/05/2010**

Tiny head in the bottle.

Lumpy sediment.

Head: ½ cm.

“Good”

“Ah blimey...”

More complex aroma.

Taste: Barest hint of orange (initially).

Long lasting.

Changes right over the tongue.

Lot on the roof of the mouth.

Treacle / Molasses. Hints of sweet coconut.

Dark orange flavours, but disappears quickly.

Peppery (alcohol)

Yeast: Enhanced slightly, prefer without.

8. **18/01/2011**

Some liveliness, not much.

Lumpy sediment.

Head: Gone.

From this point backwards in date is where the smell got interesting.

Note: over sell by date. Generally seem to improve beyond sell by date.

Gentle chocolate flavour, more gentle sugary aroma. Honey aromas.

Initial smell quite different to the previous beers.

More alcoholic fumes.

Yeast: lovely – “that’s done it”. Gives a more classic Rochefort 10.

Brings out a lot more of honey flavour.

9. 24/01/2012

(10 months past sell by date)

Fairly lively in the bottle.

Head: Starting to break.

More zingy – head lingers a lot longer.

Not the multilayered complexity of the others.

Sweet, fresher yeast aroma.

More like the Rochefort 10 you would get in a Belgian pub.

More simple.

Yeast: Complexity is in the yeast.

Darker chocolate flavours come out.

Lynda – preferred without.

10. 12/11/2014

Lively in the bottle.

Most sediment.

Head: thinning.

Taste: Doesn’t mellow through.

Toffee.

Alcohol burn.

Almond flavour – quite pronounced.

Simple in the flavour separation.

Yeast: merges the flavours together, coats the mouth more.

11. 15/09/2016

Not a lot of bubbles.

Unstable sediment.

Head: More than ½ cm.

Aroma – dissipated – but by now it was a couple of hours after opening.

Not as complex.

Sweet and earthy.

Young.

Pleasant enough.

Yeast: Spreads the flavours.

Adds bitterness.

12. 15/07/2017

Not very fizzy.

Looser head on opening.

Head: still thick > ½ cm

“Burnt” aromas.

More yeasty / lively.

Younger fresher fruit smells.

Not quite as interesting.

Fruity.

Yeast: doesn't do anything. Muddles the flavours. Younger ones better without.

Revisit top 3 plus wildcard.

From notes taken, 2006, 2009, 2010 – seemed to be the best.

2004 added as a wild card, because it was quite good and the oldest.

2004- Good but not the best.

2006 – Better than the 1st. Zingy on the front of the tongue, builds up.

2009 – “Orgasmic”, “the nose is so much better”. Lynda's preference.

2010 – Stuart, Stuart & Diane preferred.

Mixing the 2004 & 2017 – just seemed to neutralise the flavours. Richness of one, and the freshness of the other, cancelled each other out.

