

# Side Conversation:

## Pouring Beer the Czech Way



## Czech Way

But, most importantly for me, beer in the Czech Republic is almost always served with a generous head of persistent foam—none of this made-for-Instagram “Iceman Pour” BS. Not only are such pours aesthetically pleasing, but a good dollop of foam accentuates beer aromas and keeps oxidation at bay. And the side-pull Czech faucet is a key part of getting that foam just right.

### THE CZECH SIDE-PULL FAUCET

One probably needs to be a bit mad to spend more than one should on a faucet that doesn't fit one's existing draught hardware and then teach oneself to pour all over again, but I have never shied away from accusations of madness. After a bit of back and forth, I managed to import a side-pull Czech faucet to Colorado and hook it up to my home kegerator (shout out to Draft Choice in Brooklyn, N.Y.). That madness, though, results in creamy lagers whose texture and foam are as enjoyable as hop bitterness and malt sweetness.

Unlike the majority of beer faucets out there, the Czech side-pull faucet is not a simple on/off affair. It is, in essence, a ball valve, not unlike the one that lets wort flow from your mash tun. A screen inside the faucet serves a similar role to the restrictor plate you find inside a stout faucet. Varying the flow rate using the ball valve makes the screen knock more or less carbon dioxide out of solution, creating varying degrees of foam. A flow-control lever on the side allows even further precision in delivering the perfect pour.

Another distinguishing feature is the long nozzle, which can be submerged in the beer as the glass fills, although immersion is controversial among Czech brew-

By Dave Carpenter with Petr Novotný

**O**f all the destinations my wife and I visited during our two years living in Berlin, the Czech Republic made perhaps the greatest impression on me in terms of beer culture. Germany is known for its legendary Biergärten, Belgium boasts an embarrassment of Trappists and lambics, and there's nowhere finer than the British Isles for cask-conditioned real ale. But the Czech Republic (or Czechia) impressed me with an attention to detail that might go unnoticed by travelers whose lives do not revolve around hops, barley, water, and yeast (and sometimes bacteria).

It doesn't hurt that Pilsner was invented here, and the golden lager doesn't get any fresher than in Pilsen and Prague. Imported Pilsner Urquell can be very good, but it's

quite different from the unpasteurized, unfiltered experience of *Tankovna*, which is delivered directly from the Pilsner Urquell brewery to pubs, where it is pumped into tanks and served quickly, usually within three days.

Urquell, owned by Japanese brewer Asahi, may be the most famous, but Budweiser B:ORIGINAL (available in the U.S. as Czechvar thanks to trademark disputes from you-know-who), brewed by state-owned Budweiser Budvar in České Budějovice, is equally refreshing. Prague's own Staropramen, owned by Molson Coors, and Asahi-owned Radegast also turn out excellent pale lagers. And those are just the big ones. U Fleků's dark lager is legendary, and countless small operations turn out delightful lagers without fanfare.





A Czech side-pull faucet can deliver just the right foam-liquid ratio to suit your personal tastes (and those of your guests).

ers. American draught beer enthusiasts know that you never—*never!*—allow the faucet to touch beer, but don't tell that to a Czech bartender. In fact, the pouring technique with such a faucet is opposite what most of us have learned in that you pour foam first and then, pressing the long faucet near the bottom of the glass, dispense liquid beer beneath the cap of foam. Of course, then you need to wipe down the faucet to keep things clean.

It takes a bit of practice to unlearn draught gospel, but once you've gotten the hang of it, you can start to play with varying ratios of liquid to foam. And you can even dispense different qualities of foam. So-called "dry foam" is what most of us experience when we order a draught beer or pour from a bottle. It shows off bubbles of varying sizes that are easy to see. And, it's mostly carbon dioxide by volume.

"Wet foam," on the other hand, is more like the thick, creamy head you get from a nitro faucet or a beer engine. The bubbles are smaller, the head more uniform. Those smaller bubbles mean there's more beer in wet foam than in dry foam, and it tends to be more persistent, often sticking around till your last sip. (Wet foam also produces a spectacular beer mustache.)

With a side-pull faucet, you can adjust levels of wet and dry foam by varying the degree to which you open the valve. Barely pulling the lever causes wet foam to issue from the nozzle. Opening it a little wider creates drier foam, and opening it fully delivers liquid beer only. And that's where things get really interesting. Because in a Czech bar, you can ask for your beer with bespoke ratios of liquid to foam.

## POURING STYLES

To get this right, I contacted my Czech friend and regular *Zymurgy* contributor Peter Novotný, who completes the remainder of this article. Any errors in the words that follow are a consequence of my editing.

**Hladinka** is what you get for Pilsner Urquell and many other brands if you don't specify the pour, and it's what most Czechs expect (although only in case that bartender actually can make it that way—more on that later). *Hladinka* or *hladina* means

"water level" in Czech. Most Czech glasses have a volume mark at either the 0.5-liter or 0.3-liter mark, with a half-liter being the most common size in any pub.

When you get *hladinka*, it means that you expect to have liquid beer surface reaching the mark, with foam from the mark to the top of the glass. The bartender pours beer just slightly below or at the mark, and it quickly reaches the mark as the foam settles. The expectation is that you then end up with approximately one-quarter foam and three-quarters beer. Also, and this is very important, *hladinka* is dispensed in one straight pour, which requires a skilled bartender. That makes it different from *na dvakrát*.

**Na Dvakrát** means "twice" in Czech, referring to the fact that beer is poured twice to get the final beer. First you pour whatever you can get as far as foam-to-beer ratio, with the intent of creating more of a "dry" foam. Then you let it settle a bit before topping it off to get liquid beer up to the mark and the rest of the glass filled with foam. Sometimes you pour more than twice to get that result. Obviously, carbonation suffers with this technique, but it requires much less skill to get there. And, *na dvakrát* will deliver more bitterness and aroma than *hladinka*.

A historical difference between *hladinka* and *na dvakrát* exists to some extent for certain brands that actually account for that type of pouring. Budweiser Budvar (the real Czech one sold as Czechvar in the United States) is often poured *na dvakrát* because the beer is intentionally slightly over-carbonated in the keg. When you pour *na dvakrát* and lose some carbonation, you still end up with proper carbonation for that brand. Plzensky Prazdroj (Pilsner Urquell) is an example of a brand that needs *hladinka*; otherwise it is under-carbonated.

**Šnyt** does not have a good English translation. It's roughly one-third beer and two-thirds foam and doesn't quite fill a half-liter glass. Now, the half-liter glass here is paramount. The reason is that a *šnyt* corresponds roughly in volume to *malé pivo*, or a small beer of one-third liter.

The reason you would get this in a Czech pub is that you want to slow down, or you're getting ready to go home and you

don't want to hold a small glass when your fellow drinkers are holding half-liters. I guess it is just a sense of pride to not have the smallest glass. Beer will also be preserved longer against oxidation due to thick and plentiful foam, so again, you can drink longer and don't worry about the quality of taste (comes in handy once again when you want to slow down the drinking pace).

At the two extremes, you can have almost all foam or almost all liquid. **Mliko** is almost only foam and served in a full half-liter glass. It has a creamier, sweeter taste and is often the nightcap you drink before heading home. **Čochtan** is virtually foamless and therefore the highest carbonation of all techniques. Very thirst-quenching.

To watch world champion bartender (yes, that's a thing) Lukáš Svoboda demonstrate all of these pours and show them side by side, check out the linked video at [HomebrewersAssociation.org/so20](http://HomebrewersAssociation.org/so20). It's all in Czech, but you'll get the idea.

## THE REGULARS

It is worth mentioning that *Čochtan*, *šnyt*, and *mliko* are pours that only certain kinds of beer geeks would order—most people even in Czechia don't know about these. Old-school Czech beer geeks are very special beer geeks, not the ones you might imagine when thinking about craft beer in the U.S. These orthodox lager drinkers usually stick to one brand of Czech lager, often only in their "home" pub. They'll have at least five half-liter beers per evening, which explains why they developed "pacing" techniques such as drinking *šnyt* and *mliko*.

We have a special word for these Czech beer geeks: *štamgast*. A *štamgast* can almost always be found in his or her pub when it's open, or at least in regular intervals, such as every Saturday. They often have a special table reserved, and their presence is vital for the atmosphere, and often the livelihood, of the pub. There would be no traditional Czech beer culture without the *štamgast*.

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