

Franconia frankly beats France





He has expanded from 300 hectolitres to almost 40,000 hectolitres over the course of decades, while always remaining true to himself. Who are we talking about here? Brewery owner, innkeeper, DJ, amateur actor and paterfamilias Konrad “Conny” Krug. His beer tastes better each time you try it. So good, in fact, that the *Krug-Bräu* Brewery in the Upper-Franconian village of Breitenlesau could hardly fill the bottles and casks fast enough. Not a “problem” any brewer would complain about, and easily remedied by a new complete line from Krones and Kosme. This was installed in an ultra-confined space, and has since the summer of last year made sure that the Krug beers can be transported to consumers in Northern Bavaria – while simultaneously also supplying them with a bit of “Franconian Switzerland”.

Here your path runs from one paradise through the next”, is what poet Jean Paul wrote back in 1798, describing Franconian Switzerland. And indeed: romantic valleys alternate with gently rolling hills and steep rocky limestone crags, meandering streams with picturesque villages. “This is a region that invites you to go into a thousand raptures, somewhat darkly melancholic, admittedly, but still so overwhelmingly friendly”, to quote a likewise enthusiastic author, Ludwig Tieck.

Cliffs, caves, castles, beer: Franconian Switzerland

Cliffs, caves, castles and beer – that’s what the triangle between Bamberg, Bayreuth and Nuremberg/Erlangen is famous for. The characteristic landscape of low mountains and hills, with its striking cliffs and caves, has long since become an Eldorado for climbing fans, one of the most important climbing areas with exacting free-climbing routes outside the Alps, riddled

underneath with numerous deep caves. The German Castle Road runs right through Franconian Switzerland, passing by castles, both intact and in ruins, and imposing palaces. History has generously studded this region with castles, around 200 of them in all, making it one of Bavaria’s “castle-heaviest” areas. And where the Castle Road runs, the Beer Trail is never very far away. With its approximately 70 breweries, Franconian Switzerland has won its place in the Guinness Book of Records as that region in the world with the highest brewery density. Many small brewing facilities are still perpetuating the “Franconian Wholesome Threesome” with brewery, tavern and farm, brewing their beer once or twice a week and serving it solely in the brewery’s own tavern, or perhaps also in a few well-chosen other inns. Mostly it’s dark beer that is traditionally brewed and drunk here.

Breitenlesau, with a populace of precisely 254, is located right in the middle of Franconian Switzerland, in the community of Waischenfeld.





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The Beer Hiking Trail runs through it, passing directly in front of the Krug-Bräu Brewery. But hang on a moment: No “passing-by” beer hiker has ever managed to pass this cosy tavern by without draining a “Seidla” (a pint) or two, possibly even three, of the dark lager beer on tap here. The beer garden in front of the brewery tavern has long since been dubbed “Conny Krug Square” by the owner’s friends, who are thus paying their due respects to the brewery’s proprietor.

A jovial jokester and a jack-of-all-trades

Konrad “Conny” Krug is a real character, a jovial jokester, a good entrepreneur, a family man, a straightforward guy, a man of his word and a jack-of-all-trades. When he was 20 years old, i.e. 40 years ago, he took over the brewery from his mother after he’d completed his apprenticeship as a brewer. Back then, he brewed 300 hectolitres of beer a year, while today the figure is just under 40,000 hectolitres. Konrad Krug’s great-great-grandfather had bought the farming estate in 1820 and started brewing beer in

1834. Konrad Krug was the first in the family to fill beer in bottles. “I began in the simplest way imaginable: I collected bottles, cleaned them with a scrubbing brush, soaked them, then took them to the tavern on a wheelbarrow, and filled them one by one at the beer tap, affixed a sticker on which I wrote ‘lager’, and sold them at 50 pfennigs a bottle”, he reminisces. “That was my state of the art in 1973, and today I own a Krones line”, he says, not without pride.

“Yes, not at all bad!”

The most popular beer from his brewery is the dark lager beer, accounting for around 70 per cent of sales. “It’s true, there are people who aren’t that keen on the dark beer, especially the tourists from northern Germany, accustomed as they are to their pilsener. But then they have one and say ‘Yes, not at all bad!’, and then they have another one. It’s always been my creed to produce a beer that’s liked by everyone if at all possible. When you see a dark beer, your associations are along the lines of ‘malty’, ‘hefty’, ‘ample’ and ‘heavy’.



The empty crates are passed on to the immersion-bath crate washer while the bottles travel on to the Lavatec E2 bottle washer.

Our dark beer is neither bitter nor sweet, nor is it watery; it's rather more on the light side, mild, very velvety with a rounded character, top-notch hops and a long-lasting aftertaste, which immediately whispers: 'Go on, have another one!' That's the *non plus ultra*, once you've achieved this, the success is yours", says an enraptured Conny, who – by the way – always chooses to be on first-name terms with his guests, addressing them in German with the familiar "Du" straight away. "We've spent a long time running trials to get where we are today. One crucial insight along the way was when we realised that our mash liquor was too hard, and therefore invariably created a somewhat astringent taste. In the meantime, we've got the message all right, and we completely soften our mash liquor. We're quite successful with our beers now – if people didn't like them, we wouldn't be." In addition to that, Krug-Bräu brews a not-too-tangy pilsener, a dark seasonal beer for festivals, an amber-coloured bock, and – quite a recent addition to the portfolio – a lightly capped, unfiltered cellar beer called "Kraftstoff" (fuel), which Conny describes as a mega-impact beer, exhibiting two-figure growth rates.

A fast seller: the "Gaas Seidla"

A fallout, so to speak, a marginal product called the "Gaas Seidla" (which roughly translates as the "Goat's Pint"), has also proved to be a most satisfying success. It's a beer-based mixed drink, which in Bavaria has been around for decades, usually prepared fresh, and available only in dis-

cotheques or bars. The name (whose origins are shrouded in the mists of time) stands for a drink mixed from beer and cola, plus a dash of high-strength alcohol like cognac or cherry liqueur. An early predecessor of the alcopops. But that was precisely the problem. When in 2008 the alcopop tax was introduced in Germany, Conny would have had to pay for this cherry-liqueur mixed drink 17 euros tax per crate. He wriggled out of that one by using a heavy cherry wine with an abv of 15 per cent instead of cherry liqueur. You see, the cherry wine is a fermented product, not a distilled one, and as such does not fall under the alcopop tax. Krug fills the "Gaas Seidla" in 0.33-litre long-neck ale bottles called "Gaas Zwergla" (Goat's Midget) and offers the crate for 14.50 euros. The quintessential fast seller.

When last summer Conny Krug's youngest daughter Carina passed her exams to qualify her as a "brewmistress", he created – together with brewmaster Rainer Heckel – the "Carinator". This is a maximally natural, unfiltered doppelbock, reddish in colour, and was served on the occasion of the 2013 broaching of the bockbier barrel in 0.3-litre ale glasses, with a mere 200 crates being filled with this product.

When Conny makes his rounds muttering under his breath

So his youngest daughter is a brewmistress, and his oldest, Simone, an MBA. Everything's settled then, Carina in charge of brewing, Simone the CFO, and himself the boss – as one might think. But this is not in fact the case – not by a long, long way. On the contrary: every member of the family does everything, and can in fact do nearly everything. His wife and his two daughters look after the bookings for the 25-bed B&B establishment, tap the beer, serve the guests, in short: they are quite simply on hand wherever they're needed.

"My wife and my two daughters, my 'girls', can really do just anything. They fry you up a good steak or organise the B&B operation, they're on top of everything. The four of us are "The Firm". And this is what I'm particularly proud of: without my girls, especially without my wife Annemarie, I wouldn't be where I'm standing now. Most definitely I would NOT have a Kro- nes line today. My wife has always been behind me one hundred per cent, never tried to block anything. Among the four of us, we can each



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feel we're somehow in charge." In the production operation, both in the brewhouse and the bottling hall, he has a "Great Team", he emphasises. "They're allrounders, the lot of them." He himself, he continues, tends to rather do the "lowly work", such as clearing the tables. "And sometimes I even feel like a dishwasher. But – no problem for me." He likes talking to his guests, goes from table to table, regaling them with an anecdote or two. After all, for years on end he was an amateur actor in his own theatre, and preferred to play the more eccentric roles. "Then there are times when I make my rounds through the tables, muttering and grumbling to myself: 'What on Earth are these people doing here, eating up all of the meat? And if they now drain the last drop of beer to top it all, I'll lose my mind, I swear'. Then guests will turn their heads, asking the waiter or waitress what sort of guy THAT is, and hear the reply: 'That's our landlord.' That's when I stop acting and explain the joke – guests just love that. Often, guests shake my hand when leaving and promise they'll be back."

The "Krug Group"

"My tax consultant keeps talking of the 'Krug Group', sounds too American for my liking", says Conny. The "Group" includes the brewery, the brewery tavern, and a dance hall. The tavern can accommodate 85 people, the beer garden 350, and the dance hall more than 800. Here, all hell is let loose every weekend from October till May. On the ground floor, there's live music, mostly hard rock or metal, while on the first floor Conny has installed a lounge, where every Saturday from 11.00 p.m. till 3.30 the next morning he himself is the DJ. "Best beer in town" you can read there on a sign – nothing like a bit of irony! "I myself am a fan of the classic oldies", he admits. "From Toto and Boston, through Status Quo right up to Rod Stewart. And now as "DJ C.K." what am I playing? Dance-floor, Rap, and House. I had to embark on an entirely fresh journey here as far as music is concerned. But my young customers are quite taken by surprise: they don't expect a 60-year-old at the turntable, playing 'Black' or '50 Cent' for them."

Everything seems to be tremendous fun for him. And – needless to say – that includes the fact his brewery is doing so well. Just ten years ago, its output came to 18,000 hectolitres. Then demand simply kept growing. “Consumers are once again returning to their roots, and that includes savouring a local beer”, he believes. “And if some sales manager guy at a major brewery regards this as a temporary phenomenon, then he’s in my view mistaken”, he says, with a sly dig at his big brothers-in-trade. His sales have roughly doubled over the past ten years, something that’s attributable not least to the fact that Krug is cooperating with northern Bavaria’s biggest beverage wholesaler. This alliance means that Krug-Bräu is now listed in all of northern Bavaria. “I’ve never deliberately pursued expansion, I did no endless foot-slogging and door-knocking. Why? Because there was demand from the consumer side, because people wanted our beer beverage wholesalers approached me of their own accord, and our alliance has turned into a win-win situation.”

“When a line is down, I get the jitters.”

The ever-increasing output figures meant that the time had come for some new bottling kit. “The old line repeatedly malfunctioned: when a line is down, then I get the jitters”, says Conny. “So a decision to install a new bottling line was taken in next to no time, out of a gut feeling. First, I had a quotation from a firm of consultant engineers, listing a lot of individual machines. Then – following a visit by a field-sales executive – Krones submitted its quotation for a complete line. Negotiations were concluded after two visits, each taking about two to three hours. “The line’s layout was simply ingenious”, says Conny. “I’ve neither the time nor the inclination to budget every single bolt. ‘When you promise me that you take on the whole job for me, that you’ll be building me a line that couldn’t be nicer, then you’ll get the order’, that’s what I said to the guy from Krones. This word of honour that someone gives me, I regard it very highly indeed. I just felt that these people would do their very best. Then we signed the contract.”

8,000 bottles an hour on a mere 240 square metres

The new line went into operation in June 2013, after only six short weeks of installation time, at

an efficiency of 93 per cent. It is rated at 8,000 bottles an hour and erected on a footprint of a mere 240 square metres, plus another 80 square metres to accommodate the peripherals, such as bright-beer tank, tank for chlorine-dioxide water, caustic sedimentation tank, high-speed steam generator, low-pressure compressor, and the control cabinets. It is here, too, that the beer pipe (coming from the storage cellar which is about 100 metres away, and laid underground) arrives and is led to a distribution panel.

Despite the rating, which one is inclined to call medium, Krug utilises a Robogrip palletising robot. This handles both depalletising and palletising, and at a later juncture will be tasked with loading the full kegs, too, as soon as a new kegging line has been installed in the adjacent room. At the disco weekends, when the guests walk from the car park to the dance hall past the glass-fronted bottling hall, Conny has the line illuminated in blue, and the robot runs without crates. Now that’s a true showman!

Glad to have the eurobottle

After the palletising robot, an unpacker and a packer of the same type have been erected facing each other. The empty crates are passed on to the immersion-bath crate washer, while the bottles travel on to the Lavatec E2 bottle washer. Conny is still using the old eurobottle: “Back then, I couldn’t make up my mind whether to change over to the NRW bottle or not, but as it happened I had no money to invest at the time. Today, I’m glad about it. Consumers appreciate this; when you ask them about the bottle, the first thing they’ll say is ‘It feels quite different when it’s resting in my hand’, and – as an afterthought – ‘This is a beer still being brewed in line with the traditions of the craft’. Many breweries would be happy if they still had the eurobottle”, explains Conny. “I did, however, introduce modular crates at that time. With hindsight, this was a mistake. I shall be changing back to a shorter crate, which by its very height is fit for eurobottles only. You know, there are meanwhile so many types of empties, it’s a real nuisance for all breweries.” In addition to the 0.5-litre eurobottle, Krug uses a 0.33-litre gourmet long-neck bottle as the only other variant. A Smartronic empty-bottle inspector checks the washed bottles’ neck finish, base, side-wall, and also detects any residual caustic. The



Konrad “Conny” Krug – a jovial jokester, a good entrepreneur, a family man, a straightforward guy: “Negotiations for the new line were concluded after two visits, each taking about two to three hours. The line’s layout was simply ingenious”, he comments.

filler chosen by Kronen is an electro-pneumatic Kosme Barifill with 30 filling valves, downstream of which is a meander-shaped Kosme buffer table, serving as time buffer. The bottles are dressed on a Kosme Unicol labeller, featuring two cold-glue stations for shoulder/body and back labels. The labels are date-coded by a Videojet inkjet printer and the bottles then packed into the crates. Overall layout work, and the entire installation job, were the responsibility of Kronen.

“It’s a dream, the way the robot dances round in a circle.”

“We now, of course, also have quite a different beer quality in the bottles”, says Conny. “The ageing process inside the bottle has been further delayed. We don’t use pasteurisation, neither flash nor otherwise, and offer our beers with a best-before period of six months. This is something that we would no longer have been able to achieve with the old line. I’m jolly glad that now I’ve got a complete bottling line, all from one vendor, and from Kronen at that. And I’m not disappointed about anything, in no way. Rather, I’m astonished at all the things that were done for me. Needless to say: we now have sufficient scope in our bottling kit, and we’ve already received the first inquiries for contract-bottling. Yesterday, for example, we filled 60,000 bottles – without any overtime, just two of us in single-shift operation. Quite honestly: that’s a dream, when you go in there where the line is, and you know that a long time ago you started off with a scrubbing brush, and now you see a robot dancing in a circle”, says an overjoyed Conny.

“And yet there are so many things that I have never done.”

“Sometimes”, he continues, “now that I’m sixty, I’d like to take it easy a bit, but at other times

not at all. When I tell my children: ‘Just imagine running the whole show without me some time’, they answer: ‘Forget it, Dad. Before you’re 70, do not even think about it.’ Yes, I’ve still got so many visions, I would have to live to be 100 to translate all of them into reality.” This does sound better from the mouth of such a tireless, life-affirming brewer, who would soon be bored to tears if he didn’t have any guests to look after: “Every year, a guy comes here to Breitenlesau from Auckland in New Zealand – his wife was born in Franconia. When this one hasn’t eaten his ‘schnitzel’ and drunk his Krug beer here, then for him there’s something missing in the year. Each time he comes, he tells me that Krug beer is the best beer in the world. In fact, I do sometimes wonder what everybody is doing here, you know. We don’t have a beach, we don’t have anything here really, all we’ve got is beer. But here they come and say: they want to die here, or one of them says he wants to drown himself in that beer.” And the two Irishmen at the next table, who are on a cycling tour, go into raptures, saying that the dark beer tastes just like in Dublin.

Dough for dumplings “by the ton” from the village shop

Among the many things that make Franconian Switzerland so welcoming and endearing are the affordable prices in catering outlets. In Krug’s beer garden, two bratwursts with cabbage cost 3.50 euros, a quarter of a duck with dumpling and red cabbage 7.90 euros. You can’t say fairer than that. This is the place to live, all right. Down-to-earth, that’s what he is on top of everything else, “Conny” Krug. He is a member of the local choir, the voluntary fire brigade, the amateur actors’ group. And the dough for the dumplings he sells, which he needs “by the ton” – he doesn’t buy that at some wholesaler, he purchases it from the village shop so as to support the owners.

His family, his homeland, his beer, his guests – that’s what he needs, that’s what he loves. For Conny, truly, Franconia frankly beats France.

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